

Crown of Straw, Sword of Gold

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/28240389) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/28240389>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationship:	Dream/GeorgeNotFound , Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sleepyboisinc - Relationship , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Toby Smith Tubbo & Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Tommyinnit & Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Darryl Noveschosch , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Dave Technoblade , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Niki Nihachu , Jack Manifold , Eret (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Royalty , Enemies to Friends to Lovers , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Hurt/Comfort , Angst with a Happy Ending , Romantic Tension , knight!dream , King!George , Alternate Universe - Medieval , Medieval AU , Idiots in Love , Miscommunication , Antarctic Empire , dadschlatt appears , Family Issues , Found Family , Family Bonding , Villain Eret , plot heavy , The romance is the main side story but there is lots of Tommy angst as well my friends , No Smut , I used as much minecraft canon as I could and made it Horrifying hope you all like it , Enemies to Lovers
Language:	English
Collections:	DSMP I'm Reading/Red , call 911 for I have died at the sheer perfection that are these fics , Sammy's Treasured Jewels , when insomnia hits , MY FAVORITE FICS
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-22 Completed: 2021-09-07 Chapters: 46/46 Words: 186289

Crown of Straw, Sword of Gold

by [opheliabloo](#)

Summary

It was an odd feeling, to be around someone you neither liked nor were liked by nearly twenty-four hours a day, but George had grown used to it.

When his kingdom is invaded and his life thrown into chaos, King George begins to realize how hard it is to maintain enemyship with the man who keeps saving his life.

Prologue

Chapter Notes

(Forgive me for the weird first line; it won't let me change it ☺)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

.The boy did not know how long he had been running, but he knew he could not stop now

The sounds of the king's horses behind them pounded in the boy's ears, becoming a garbled roar that sounded like a massive wave was cresting behind him, ready to swallow him whole. But the boy was nimble, and the boy was smart. He dove to the side, scraping the bottoms of his feet on the hardened frost that sat in a thick blanket upon the grass, then shot back in the direction from whence he'd come. The king's horses spooked and squealed, buying the boy precious seconds as the knights fought to regain control of their mounts. One of them, a well-dressed man upon a hulking black monster of an animal, raised his arm and shot his crossbow. The boy ducked, feeling an arrow graze his cheek and leave it stinging in the biting night air. His lungs were full of fire and he tasted blood in his mouth. The forest was thick, unforgiving to even the most experienced of woodspeople, and the boy knew that he could not match the stamina of a dozen massive horses.

So he did the one thing horses could not: climb.

Two more arrows sliced their ways up his back as he fought his way through the tangled branches, leaving two open wounds in their wake that dribbled warm blood down his skin. The boy's breath came out in clouds above him. He reached for another branch only to have the tree shake violently, nearly sending him crashing to the ground.

"Again!" Came a booming voice from below. The man on the black horse stared up at him with thunderous eyes. The boy felt fear in his chest. Boom . The tree shook once more, creaking, and the boy's grip on the damp bark loosened. He tried to regain his hold but his freezing hands were stiff and the creeping tendrils of exhaustion had begun their slow descent down his arms and into his fingers. Boom . The tree careened sideways. The boy felt himself fall into open air.

He hit the ground with enough force to knock him out cold.

When he woke, he was significantly warmer. His head hurt like it had never hurt before, and he had several more bruises and scrapes along his arms and legs that he did not remember getting.

Suddenly realizing where he was, the boy scrambled onto all fours and backed himself into one of the cell's corners. A massive figure stood before him on the other side of the bars, holding the single torch that flooded the room with flickering orange light.

"Can you speak?" The man asked.

The boy did not answer. He could speak, in fact; it had been years since his mother had taught him the complicated tongue of the kingdoms, but he remembered it nonetheless. He bared his teeth and growled.

"I believe you can, boy." The man's voice was deep, eerily calm. The boy noticed an ornate sword hanging at his side. "If you had a head upon your shoulders, you'd answer to your king."

"Not my king." The boy's voice was hoarse from disuse.

The king let out a cold, barking laugh. "Not your king? You're a sharp little fellow."

The boy flattened himself against the floor, his scabs opening with sharp pricks of pain and oozing blood.

"I have never seen anyone run as fast as you ran back there," The king said. He began to pace up and down the length of the small room, hands folded in front of him. "And my soldiers tell me you're quite the nasty little bastard with a sword. Are you trained?"

The boy shook his head. Fighting had always been something that came to him naturally; having to fight off animals and other street urchins for scraps of food had made him strong, nearly unbeatable against the other children when he had a weapon.

"You've caused far too much trouble for me to release you. I've gotten many complaints about you causing trouble."

The king smiled, but his eyes were cold and glass-like. "I'm going to give you a proposition. In exchange for your life, you will indebt yourself to me and become a knight in my army. I believe that with some proper training, you could become a valuable asset."

The boy spit on the ground before the king's feet. There was ice in the pit of his chest.

The king narrowed his glittering eyes. "Should you refuse my offer, you will promptly be executed."

Death or a life of servitude. What good options, thought the boy bitterly. I'd sooner kill myself than serve him.

"You will be fed, clothed, given a place to sleep," the king continued. "There are boys your age being trained as you would be. You could have friends. A purpose to serve a greater cause."

Friends. The boy had never had a friend before. On the streets, friends were a liability.

"I suggest you give me an answer before I revoke my offer entirely. This is not generosity you have earned, boy."

"Fine." The boy hissed. He just wanted to be out of his cell. He'd find a way to escape; he was sure of it. For now, he'd placate the king and save his own hide while he concocted a plan.

The wry, toothless smile the king gave him sent a wave of fear down the boy's spine.

~

"This is George. Crown prince of the SMP kingdom."

The boy stared at the prince on the throne, earning himself a curled lip. "You're supposed to bow," said the prince coldly.

The boy bent himself over at the waist, smiling toothily. The prince leaned over to his father and hissed something in his ear. The king's face soured with exasperation.

"... the best of all the training knights..." the boy only heard snippets of the king's whispered reply. "...you don't have to like him; he's not a lord-in-waiting..."

The boy held down his smirk. Never in his life had he seen someone he liked less than the crown prince of the Sola-Manticoli-Polar kingdom (Sola-Manticoli-Polar? What a stupid name). The prince couldn't have been much older than he was, and the boy could tell already that he towered over his lithe, wiry frame. On the streets, the boy would have eaten the sour-faced prince for lunch.

Seemingly annoyed by his son's rising aggression, the king waved his hand in the air to shut the prince up (oh, what the boy would have given to have that kind of power over that little sod!) and focused his attention back on the boy. "You. What is your name again?"

"Dream," he said proudly. His friend Sapnap had given it to him because he could knock the other boys out cold with his punches. It was the most badass name ever.

"That's a stupid name," the prince piped in, fiddling with his crown. "Are you a warlock or something?"

"George," the king warned. Dream hoped he would get to see him kick his son's ass. "I'd like Dream to be your personal bodyguard. There is nobody better-suited for keeping you safe."

"No!" They shouted in unison.

The king looked like he wanted to slap them both. "Dream has been here for nearly six months," he continued, keeping his calm. "His skills are far above the other trainees; I feel like I can trust him with your safety."

George sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "He's a street boy. He'll probably steal my shit."

"Language, George." The king tightened his jaw. "I did not bring you two here to discuss this. My decision is final, and if either of you sabotage or undermine my authority, then you will be subject to serious punishment. Approach, Dream."

Dream took a couple reluctant steps forward. As he neared, George shrunk into himself, frowning petulantly. "He is not kissing my hand," he mumbled.

The king rolled his eyes. "He doesn't have to. Bow again, Dream, and this can be over soon."

Dream bowed again. He ached to be back out in the training yard with the other boys. Sapnap would laugh until he pissed himself when he found out the shit position he was in.

"You will accompany George whenever he leaves the castle premises, as well as to and from any royal meetings that take place. As a prince, there aren't many he needs to attend, but they will be nearly weekly when he becomes king." The king rubbed his hands together. "You shall also be posted outside his room at night whenever he or I ask."

George put his face in his hands. "I do not need a bodyguard!"

"I had one when I was your age! He's saved my life many times." The king gestured towards Dream with an open hand. "Even to this day he is a very good friend of mine."

George rolled his eyes. "Sure. Can we be done now, please?"

The king nodded. "You're free to leave, Dream. I shall call you when I need you."

Dream could barely stop himself from running out of the castle doors. Sapnap waited for him in the training yard, eyebrows raised. "Dude, the others told me you'd been summoned by the king! Are you being executed or something?"

Dream sat up against the old fighting dummy and pressed his eyes into his knees. "I wish. I'm the prince's personal bodyguard now."

Sapnap cackled. "Dude! That's awesome! I bet the perks will be amazing. You can see so many royal ladies."

"Are you kidding?" Dream said. "I hate this! The prince is awful!"

Sapnap tapped him on the shoulder with his sword. "You've met him once; I'm sure he'll be fine. All you have to do is make sure he doesn't die."

“Fine.” Dream did not feel convinced. He rose to his feet and caught his wooden sword as Sapnap tossed it to him. “If I have to make a daring escape to get out of this place, you’re coming with me.”

Sapnap grinned. “Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

GUESS WHO IS BACK BABIES

idk what happened to the first line but oh well lmao

I hope you all enjoy this fic! I’m excited for you all to see what kind of pain I will inflict >:)

-Ophelia

Young Princes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“That is *so* not true!”

Tommy nodded enthusiastically. “It is! I swear!”

“Dream can’t breathe fire, Tommy. That’s just a legend.” Tubbo dragged a small piece of cloth back and forth over his horns, stopping only to put a drop of oil on the rag. “My dad says that the old king thought he was a really good fighter, and that’s why he hired him to protect King George.”

Tommy flopped back on the ornate couch and pretend to breathe fire. “People say that Dream breathed fire at the foot of the king as an act of defiance when he was about to be executed, and the king was so impressed with his boldness that he hired him to protect his only son. That is so much cooler than just ‘being a good fighter’.”

Tubbo rolled his eyes and fixed the collar of his suit. “Do I look okay? Are my horns shiny?”

“Blindly so. Do I have any loose feathers?” Tommy sat up and turned his back to his friend, stretching out his wings as far as he could.

“Nope! You look great!” Tubbo replied with a smile. “Our first royal meeting. I think I’m going to shit myself.”

Tommy straightened the small crown on his head. “My brother says they’re boring. I don’t even know why I’m going! I’m not going to be king until my dad and both my brothers die. Which is hopefully never.”

Tubbo had no crown, only fine chains of gold that hung from his horns. Tommy thought they made him look like a willow tree. “I’m king once my dad dies. I hope it’s not for a long time. Being king sounds stressful.”

“Could to imagine becoming king at nineteen? Poor George.” The door to their small waiting room opened, revealing one of the Antarctic Empire guards. He motioned for them with a wave of his hand. Buzzing excitedly, they were led down the long hall and to a room from which Tommy could hear the muffled sounds of voices from yards away. *It must be an important meeting*, Tommy thought. *They’re not usually this loud.*

The guard pushed the doors open, and the room fell silent. It was a large room, done up in all the whites and blues of the Antarctic Empire (the best kingdom in the world, in Tommy’s humble opinion), with an ornate circular table sat in the middle. The three seats at the table were already filled, the largest of which by Tommy father, King Phil. He wasn’t Tommy’s biological father, but people wouldn’t know the difference unless they were told. Tubbo often said that he looked like a mini version of his dad with different wings.

Tubbo’s father Schlatt sat in the next chair, looking rather miffed. He was dressed in a simple suit, his massive ram’s horns meticulously taken care of and draped in shining golden chains. Though he wouldn’t say it to Tubbo, Tommy found the kingdom of Manburg to be quite boring. Everything about them seemed so dark and plain. Besides Tubbo, of course. Tubbo was awesome. He also happened to be Tommy’s best friend, which was also awesome.

In the third chair, looking so out of place between the two massive kings, sat King George. King George may have been an adult in the technical sense, but between Phil and Schlatt, he looked like a child. He was well-dressed, seemingly calm, his hands folded neatly in front of him. There was an ease about him that had always put Tommy off, as if he knew something they did not. Maybe he was just overcompensating for being so young. Tommy really didn't know.

Phil, upon seeing them, gave them a warm smile. His wing — a muscular albatross wing — stretched out and pointed them towards the small chairs that lined the back wall of the room. Tommy's brothers sat in two of them, dutifully straight-backed but obviously bored. Only one other seat was occupied — the one sat directly behind King George.

If there was anyone on the planet that Tommy believed could breathe fire, it was Dream. King George's monstrous lapdog towered over almost everyone in the room, safe for Wilbur, and was so well-built that Tommy would bet money on him being able to snap any of them in half with a single twist. Like the terrifying cherry on top of a terrifying sundae, Dream constantly wore a white porcelain mask emblazoned with a creepy smiley face that seemed better-suited to a serial killer than a royal guard. According to the legends, he'd worn it for so long that even George did not know what he looked like.

"Dude," Tommy whispered in Tubbo's ear as they took their seats. "You think there's something wrong with his face and that's why he wears that mask?"

Tubbo stifled a giggle. "No, idiot. Dream apparently does undercover work and shit. He has to wear it so nobody knows what he looks like."

Dream turned his head and stared at them. Silently, he brought up a finger to the mouth of his mask and shushed them. Tommy wondered how he could see out of it. Maybe it was enchanted?

Schlatt cleared his throat. "Let's return to business now that the boys are here."

"I agree," said Phil with nod. "George, you were saying—"

"Absolutely not, Schlatt," George cut in. "That's what I was saying."

Schlatt frowned. "I have reason to believe that the Eretian kingdom is readying their forces for an attack on the border between your kingdom and mine. We should be readying our forces!"

"I will not have my subjects thrown into a panic over a threat of which you have no proof," George replied smoothly.

"King Eret has been after your kingdom ever since your father passed away. He knows you are a weak link. If we don't do something now, your whole kingdom is in grave danger."

Tommy leaned in to Tubbo and whispered, "Was the kingdom named after him or was he named after the kingdom?"

"Kingdom's named after him," Tubbo replied quietly. "It's their tradition to rename the kingdom after the current king. It's super confusing."

Techno poked Tommy's leg. "Quiet," he hissed. Tommy leaned back in his chair and forced back a sigh.

"I appreciate the concern, Schlatt, but I have no reason to aggravate the Eretian kingdom by sending a bunch of soldiers down to the border out of nowhere. I'll keep an eye out for anything suspicious." George waved his hand dismissively. "And if I get assassinated, I give you permission

to contact me by seance to tell me 'I told you so'."

Schlatt rolled his eyes, but Phil couldn't hold back the low chuckle that rumbled in his throat. "Alright, enough of that, then. Let's continue on."

~

The rest of the meeting was much duller without the exciting talk of assassination and incoming invasions. If he were being honest, Tommy barely remembered a thing his father and his fellow kings had spoken about past the topic of the Eretians. Even Tubbo looked a little bleary-eyed by the time the kings finally rose from their seats and shook hands. Roused from his eerie stillness by George's movement, Dream rose from his seat and glided to George's side, acknowledging nobody except Phil, to whom he gave the smallest of nods. The twin axes tied to Dream's back gleamed in the sunlight.

"Dream and George apparently can't stand each other," Tubbo whispered excitedly as he gathered his things. "My dad says he hears them argue all the time whenever he goes to visit the SMP kingdom. Isn't that weird?"

Tommy watched Dream's back as he followed behind King George out of the room and disappeared. "I feel like I'd get tired of anyone who I spent nearly twenty-four hours a day with, too."

"Even me?" Tubbo stuck his lip out, earning a punch to the gut that left him giggling.

"Especially you!" Tommy scoffed. "Last time we had a sleepover you head-butted me in your sleep and knocked me off the bed. I'd probably strangle you if I ever had to spend all day every day with you." Tommy kicked at a dozing Wilbur's ankle until he jerked awake, mumbling. "Let's go find Ranboo."

"I have to go home!" Tubbo pouted.

"Ask your dad to stay here for another night, then!"

"You just said you would strangle me if you spent more time with me!"

"I changed my mind and now I want a sleepover." Tommy pushed his friend in his father's direction. "Go ask before he gets grumpy over George."

Wilbur stretched out his back, groaning. His speckled grey wings were frazzled from being tucked behind him for so long. "How was your first royal meeting, little man?"

"Boring," Tommy said.

Wilbur chuckled. "Hopefully, you'll never have to be actually in one. Techno's not so lucky."

Techno had moved to their father's side in the moments they'd been conversing and stood with his back to them, gesturing in the direction of the door. Knowing he would one day be king, Techno took all the royal meetings and princely lessons annoyingly seriously. He modeled himself after their father, with the strong posture and seemingly endless knowledge fit for a king. Had it not been for the bright pink hair that sat neatly braided down Techno's back or his inky falcon's wings, he would have looked like Phil's clone even more than Tommy did.

"Techno probably loves them," Tommy laughed. "You know how gung-ho he is about being the next king."

Wilbur scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I hear about it like twice a minute. I cannot believe that he doesn’t get bored of all this shit.”

Tubbo came running back, eyes shining. “My dad said I can stay!”

Tommy whooped. “Cool! Let’s go find Ranboo.”

He ripped off his fancy cape, stuffed it into Wilbur’s hands before he could protest, and practically bounded out of the meeting room with Tubbo following at his heels. The halls of the Antarctic Empire’s palace had high ceilings and long rectangular windows that let the sunlight come in in thick golden rays. Tommy opened his wings and glided ahead, doing loops in the air as Tubbo ran behind him. Out they went into the small courtyard, Tommy’s arms prickling from the cold, and down the staircase that led to the frosty training field below. Tommy landed with a huff, face flushed. “Ranboo!” He yelled.

Tubbo sprinted up, heaving. “Dude! You know can’t keep up when you fly,” he whined.

Tommy did a quick once-over of the training field. It was empty. “Ranboo’s not here.”

“Maybe he’s in the kitchen?” Tubbo wiped a bead of sweat from his brow and began pulling the now-tangled threads of gold from his horns. “Shit. My dad’s gonna kill me if I don’t untangle these.”

“Ranboo!” Tommy called. The air next to him whined loudly, then a presence appeared before him with a burst of purple particles.

“Tommy!” Ranboo grinned. He noticed Tubbo behind him, still struggling with the spiderweb of gold on his horns, and jumped with excitement. “Tubbo!”

Ranboo was an odd character, to say the least. Being a rare enderman-human hybrid, there were many characteristics of his that took a while to get used to. Being able to teleport seemed to be the *least* intriguing part of Tommy’s rather interesting friend. His skin tone split him down the middle, painting one side of him jet black and the other side a milky white. His ears stuck out sideways like Tubbo’s (Tommy had never understood why he had lamb’s ears; endermen don’t even *have* ears at all!) and his eyes were a jarring mix of red and green that hurt Tommy’s head if he looked at them for too long.

He was also one of the nicest people Tommy had ever met in his life, so all of the aforementioned characteristics simply added to his charm.

Ranboo wrapped his arms around Tubbo and lifted him straight off the ground. “I’m so happy to see you guys!” He exclaimed. “My morning was so boring. None of the other guards would spar with me!”

“Tell us about it!” Tommy replied. “We had to go to our first royal meeting and it was horrible. I hope I’m never king.”

Tubbo squirmed his way out of Ranboo’s grip and rubbed at the sore spot on his ribs. “We got to see Dream, though. So that was cool.”

“The dude is massive!” Tommy flexed his muscles and posed. “I’m pretty sure he could beat me in a fight.”

Ranboo’s mismatched eyes shone with excitement. “That’s so cool!”

A creaking sound from behind them broke their bubble of childish excitement. Dream walked into the courtyard, barely registering them if at all, and darted his way up the staircase that led back into the palace.

Ranboo was gone in a flurry of purple sparks before Tommy could stop him. In what seemed like a split second, Dream shouted in surprise, unsheathed an axe, and swung it into the wooden pole mere inches from Ranboo's face.

"Dude!" Tommy sprinted up the staircase and rushed to his friend's side as Dream took a step back and rubbed at his mask with his hand. Ranboo wasn't hurt, thankfully, but his eyes were the size of dinner plates and his mouth had dropped open in shock. Tommy turned to Dream and threw his hands up. "What's the matter with you, man?"

"Don't fucking startle people like that!" Dream ripped his axe from the splintering pole and sheathed it again with a white-knuckled hand. "I could have killed you!"

Ranboo mumbled something unintelligible. Tommy gently pushed him behind him. "Apologize!" He stuck a finger in Dream's face. "My friend only wanted to say hi!"

Dream's freaky mask may have hid his facial expressions, but his body visibly stiffened. "Your friend nearly scared the shit out of me. People aren't expecting someone to just teleport right in front of them."

Ranboo looked down in embarrassment, digging his toe in the dirt. Tubbo stood at the bottom of the staircase with wide eyes. *You okay?* He mouthed.

Yeah, Tommy mouthed back. He turned back to Dream, who crossed his arms. "I said to apologize. I'm a prince, you know."

"I work for King George, not you," Dream said with an exasperated sigh. "Go on, now. I have to go find something of the king's."

Tommy scowled. "Apologize!"

"What the hell are you doing?"

Tommy whirled around and heard Dream's breath catch from behind him. King George stood at the other end of the courtyard, holding a pair of thick goggles in his hand. Without his long, ornate cape, he looked rather tiny. Nevertheless, his thunderous expression seemed to put Dream on immediate edge.

"Your Highness," Dream said quickly. "I got distracted by—"

"Fighting with children, are we?" King George's tone dripped with annoyance. "One of the guards found my glasses. Let's get going."

Dream nodded robotically. "Yes, your Highness."

He darted back down the staircase, turning only to flip them off when he was sure George would not see, and disappeared around the corner. Ranboo let out a loud breath. "Holy crap. I thought I was a goner."

Tubbo jogged up to meet them, stuffing the remainders of his golden threads into his pocket. "Yeah, man. Maybe cut back on the teleporting. Especially around axe-wielding dickhead bodyguards who can definitely breathe fire."

They broke out into a fit of giggles, evaporating the tension left in the air. Tommy looked at the space where Dream stood moments before and stuck his tongue out.

“I’m going to tell my dad that he axed our doorway. I hope George kicks his ass.”

Chapter End Notes

if you noticed the spacing between the prologue and this chapter is different no you didn’t

I have a tumblr now! Go follow me @opheliabloo :D

I’m super excited that people seem to be liking this premise! I hope it continues to make you guys happy :)

-Ophelia

The Ride Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George leaned his head on the window of the carriage and closed his eyes. “Aether above, that was fucking boring.”

Across from him, Dream sat motionless, face turned to the window. He merely grunted in response to George’s remark. George rolled his eyes. “Most of that stuff could have been figured out over letters. I don’t know why Schlatt insisted we meet in person. Now I have to pay extra to get nether-travelled back.”

“Kingly duties, your highness,” Dream mumbled. “They’re not always interesting.”

A prickle of annoyance ran up George’s spine. Contrary to what most believed, Dream and George were not friends. There was, actually, quite a bit of distaste between them. George himself had never wanted a bodyguard, but Dream had been thrust into his lap as a teenager and now he wasn’t quite sure how to get rid of him. With the rising political climate concerning his neighbouring kings, he couldn’t really afford to lose his 24/7 protection, either. Dream was sullen, sharp and crass, but he was at least good at his job. If he could hold a damn conversation without being an ass, George could have probably tolerated him.

It was quite an odd feeling, to be around someone whom you neither like nor are liked by nearly twenty-four hours a day, but George had grown used to it.

“No need to be rude,” he replied with frown. “If there’s anyone I should be able to rant to, it’s you.”

“You have lords-in-waiting for your gossip. I’m just here to make sure you don’t die.”

“I—“ George crossed his arms. “I’m the king, and I can gossip to whoever I want.”

“Yes, your highness.”

George scowled and closed his eyes, hoping to shave a couple of hours off their long journey home by taking a nap. If there was anything that put him in the mood to sleep, it was a long royal meeting.

He felt Dream’s eyes on him, boring into the skin of his arms and face, but when he cracked an eye open to investigate, Dream’s masked face was still trained on the passing red forests around them. George picked up his thick goggles and inspected them, mostly out of boredom than anything else. “Care to tell me why you were fighting with the young princes when I sent you to find my goggles?”

Dream let out a grunt through his nose. “Their little enderman buddy teleported right in front of me and scared the shit out of me. Prince Tommy wanted me to apologize.”

“And did you?”

Despite not being able to see his face, George was certain that Dream rolled his eyes. “I didn’t do anything wrong, so I had nothing to apologize for.”

George frowned. "Can you not put me in a bad light in front of my fellow kings by picking fights with their twelve-year-old children? I'm already fighting enough to be taken seriously as it is."

Dream crossed his arms and threw one of his legs over the other. His nonchalance was irritating. "You're taken plenty seriously, your Highness."

"Are you blind behind that mask?" George snapped. "Schlatt thinks I'm a nuisance and King Phil's fatherly instincts are so out of control that I think he just wants to cuddle me or something." He pressed his palms into his eyelids and watched swirls of nothingness bloom before his eyes. "Three adopted sons! Can you believe that? Three of them! I don't even think he's married!"

He remembered when a little Tommy had been introduced to him at a solstice ball. Barely six years old, he'd been no taller than Phil's thigh and stayed pressed up against him the whole time, flying into hysterics if Phil dared to do so much as take him off his hip to get a glass of punch. The next year, he'd been a crackling, squawking ball of energy, his moulting wings leaving cream-coloured feathers everywhere. Dream had never had a fondness for the little Arctic prince, but George had always tolerated him and his antics with a light heart. Phil tried his best to give his children normal childhoods, separated from the pressures of royal life. For that, George both envied and respected them.

George turned onto his side, pressing his face into the plush material of the carriage seat. "If I get one letter from Phil about this, I'll have your head on a stick."

Dream's only answer was a quiet scoff. "Have a little nap, your Highness. You're grumpy."

I'd slap him if I had the energy, George thought to himself. *Nearly eight years as my bodyguard and he still hasn't got an ounce of respect for me.*

He woke hours later, feeling like his head was full of wool. They were back on the overworld, right on the cusp of the sunset. Dream's masked face was a saturated yellow in the dimming sunlight. George cracked his sore neck.

"Shit," he mumbled, smoothing his ruffled hair. "Could you have not woken me up a little earlier? I feel like shit."

Dream opened the carriage door and hopped out, holding it for George as he fixed his cape and stepped out into the warm evening air. "You looked comfortable," he said. "Plus, last time I dared to wake you from a nap, you nearly ripped my head off."

George leaned back and stretched, feeling the bones of his spine click. "If there's nothing else to do today, I'm going straight to bed. Lead me to my room, please."

They walked in silence and in relative isolation. There weren't many people outside of the castle at sundown, and the couple that were scurried out of sight when they saw them coming. Dream's axes clinked melodically with every step. He'd walked the same way ever since he was a teenager—leaned slightly forward, arms barely moving at his sides. His strides were so long that George had to tell him repeatedly to slow down over the years. Dream did not seem to understand that having to jog by his bodyguard's side did not do any favours for George's standing with his fellow royals.

Quackity, one of the young lords-in-waiting, stood at George's bedroom door and waved to them as they approached. George felt himself relax a little. A friend. Though it was technically his job to be George's friend, the two of them had become quite close over the last couple years. He was one of the only people George knew who could make him laugh so hard he choked.

“Your Highness,” he said, giving a long, exaggerated bow. He and Quackity had been on a first-name basis for years, but it cracked his friend up to call George by his formal title.

Rolling his eyes, George let himself smile nonetheless. “Good evening, Quackity. Have you got news for me?”

“Nope!” Quackity replied. “I just heard you guys were coming back and I wanted to see if you’d like some evening company.”

Dream perked in surprise, but said nothing. Quackity noticed the tension and bit his lips to keep from laughing.

“I’d love some,” George said calmly. “Dream, you’re free for the evening. Come back when the sun has set.”

Dream bowed, then walked briskly until he was out of sight. Face red, Quackity pushed open the doors to George’s room and practically fell in, laughing. “Oh, gods! He definitely thinks you’re banging me! Evening company!” He burst into a fit of shrill cackles. “I could have worded that so much better!”

George removed his cape and crown and set them on the small couch by the door. “Aether almighty,” he chuckled, rubbing his hands over his eyes. “I don’t care how many years I’m stuck with that guy; he is never knowing about my sex life. I’ll risk assassination rather than have him standing outside my door as I’m getting some action.”

Quackity flopped down onto one of the plush chairs by the unlit fireplace, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “If you’d like, I can ruffle up my hair and button my shirt all wrong when he comes back. That’ll make him squirm.”

“I’d love to make him squirm after the shit he pulled today with Prince Tommy. He pulled an axe on a twelve-year-old just for startling him!” George pinched the bridge of his nose. “And he didn’t even apologize to them. Or me, for that matter! It’s like he gets off on being as annoying as he can.”

“I don’t see why you don’t just fire him if he annoys you so much. Sapnap could probably do as good of a job.”

“I can’t just fire him,” George waved a hand dismissively. “Light up the fire. It’s chilly in here.”

Quackity set to work on the fireplace, and George sat his aching body down on the small, embroidered couch. It wasn’t all that comfy — more for show than for use — but he was so exhausted from the day that he could have slept there. A fire bloomed beneath Quackity’s hands, filling George’s nose with the smell of burning wood. It was one of his favourite smells, one that filled him with calm.

“Why can’t you fire him?” Quackity leaned back on his heels. “You two literally hate each other. Isn’t that a security risk or something?”

“We don’t *hate* each other,” George corrected. “We’re just don’t get along. That doesn’t change the fact that he’s the best swordsman from here to the Antarctic Empire.”

“Dream’s still mad about losing Prince Tommy’s birthday duel to Prince Technoblade?” Quackity giggled.

“He still maintains that he let Technoblade win to make his brother happy, but that’s a fat lie.

Dream doesn't like losing. Certainly not to Technoblade." George would have killed for a cup of tea, but he didn't have the energy to send for someone to make it for him. Leaning his head against the carved wooden arms of the couch, he closed his eyes.

"You know, King Schlatt thinks the Eretian kingdom is going to invade us."

Quackity started. "What?"

"Don't get nervous; he's got no proof," George yawned. "He gets these crazy hunches sometimes. I think he's paranoid."

"Yikes." Quackity sat down on the love seat across from him, arms folded across his chest. "That's scary. I've heard you mention King Eret once or twice. He's the young one, right?"

George nodded. "Yeah. He's only a couple of years older than me. I think he's Technoblade's age."

"With the freaky white eyes?"

"Descended straight from Herobrine, says the legends. I think he's just a little overzealous when it comes to conquering land. He's..." George paused. "Opportunistic, if you would."

"And your dad dying and leaving you an entire kingdom at nineteen is a pretty decent opportunity, man. You've only been king for like, two years now."

"He could have invaded earlier, when I was new and vulnerable," said George. "I'm not too worried. All I need is a decent sleep."

Quackity softened, but he did not look totally convinced. "Whatever you say, man."

Dream returned a couple hours later, mere minutes after the sun had disappeared behind the mountains. He nodded respectfully to Quackity as he left, seemingly ignoring the several buttons he'd left undone down his shirt, and only grunted as he watched Quackity swagger back down the hall. "Have fun?" He asked humourlessly.

"Lots," George chuckled. Dream huffed out his noses. Aether Almighty, he really couldn't take a joke if his life depended on it. "Are you doing night duty again? I could get Sapnap to do it if you need a break."

"I'm staying here." Dream took his usual spot in the seat against the wall, pulling out one of his axes and a sharpening stone. "If there's any chance we might be invaded by the Eretians, I'm not risking it."

"You too?" George ran a hand through his hair. "Why is everyone so paranoid about the Eretians?"

"It's my job to be paranoid, your Highness." The snark in Dream's voice made George want to punch him. "I kind of have to keep you alive if I want to keep working."

"You're supposed to want to keep me alive because I'm your king, Dream. Not because you want a job."

Yes, it was a stupid fight to pick. But George was tired and picking fights with Dream was a good way to blow off some steam.

“I keep you alive because it’s my job to keep you alive. Happy?” Dream said stiffly.

“Nearly a decade at my side and you still haven’t got a shred of respect for me,” George continued. “It’s insulting. You know people can tell that you don’t actually like me?”

Dream turned his head and stared George down with the unsettling, beady eyes of his mask. “Nearly a decade of me keeping your ass safe and you still haven’t thanked me once.”

George crossed his arms. “I don’t have to thank you. This job was given to you out of the kindness of my father’s heart and you should be thanking *him* until the day you die.”

Dream dragged the sharpening stone across the blade of his axe, creating a shrill screeching noise that set George’s nerves on fire. “Can you stop that shit?” George snapped.

Dream paused, eerily still for a couple moments. Then, he let out a long, slow breath. “Go to sleep, your Highness.”

George felt crackles of energy running up and down his spine. Shit. He needed a good argument and Dream was being too much of a jaded bastard to give him what he wanted.

“You—“ George grabbed the sharpening stone from Dream’s hand and threw it down the hall with all his might. Momentarily satisfied, he whirled back around and stuck a finger in Dream’s face. “Do not tell me what to do, Dream. I am your king.”

Dream rose to his feet, leaning his axe against the wall. George felt a moment of fear. He’d forgotten how large Dream could look when he wanted to. “Go to sleep, your Highness,” he repeated slowly. There was an edge to his words that doused the fire in George’s veins with ice.

Dream breezed past him, their shoulders barely touching. George wiped at his forehead and realized he was sweating. “I think I’m getting sick,” he murmured.

Dream returned, sharpening stone tucked protectively in his hand. “You need rest. Go to sleep.”

Nodding silently, George ambled back into his room and closed the door behind him. Without his irritable energy, he felt gutted and small. He’d actually chucked Dream’s sharpening stone down the hall like a tantruming child. Exhaustion really did a number on him.

George climbed into bed, sinking beneath the silky sheets until he was buried up to his nose in weight and warmth.

Note to self. Never nap in carriages.

Chapter End Notes

I AM SO FUCKING SORRY

for those confused I posted the Invasion chapter on Christmas TOTALLY FUCKUNG FORGETTING ABT THIS ONE

The invasion chapter as well as the next one will be posted today too as apologies lol

-Ophelia

Invasion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George woke with a single thought in his sleep-addled mind.

Fuck, I'm thirsty.

He moved out of bed, feeling the cool air raise goosebumps along his arms. Gods, he hated the cold. Why was it so cold in his room?

The night outside his open window was cloudy, starless; George could barely see far enough in front of him to amble to the jug of water on his reading table and pour a glass without knocking it over. He looked to his bedroom door, seeing but a sliver of light along the bottom. He wondered if Dream was still there. It must get boring, standing out there all night. There wasn't enough gold in the world to make George do that job willingly.

He spilt some water over his fingers and mumbled in dismay. His tongue felt thick and dry in his mouth. He wiped his hand on his shirt and shivered. Was it always so cold in his room?

George lifted the glass of water to his lips and had barely taken a single gulp before he realized something with a deep chill in the pit of his stomach.

Why was the window to his room open?

A great force slammed itself into his side, knocking George forward onto his table. His glass of water clattered to the floor and shattered. George tried to scream but a hand slapped itself over his mouth and nose, pressing him downwards until he knelt in the broken glass, scrabbling desperately at nothing. He banged his fists on the walls, the legs of the table, *anything* to make a noise. Was Dream even out there?

George's knees stung. His lungs were on fire. A spot on his back had become a minefield of agony and warmth dripped down the backs of his thighs. The hand on his mouth was unrelenting in his force. *Am I going to die here?* George thought wildly.

He sunk his teeth into the palm of his attacker, buying him enough time to gasp for air as they recoiled in shock. Oxygen flooded George's frazzled brain and a burst of stars exploded before his eyes. George pushed himself off his knees and careened sideways, blinded by his shock and fear. He hit the wall hard, stunned into stillness by the excruciating pain that exploded in his side.

"Dream!" He shrieked. A hand grabbed his hair and pulled his head backwards. "Help! Dream!"

"Get away from him!"

Thunk. One of Dream's axes lodged itself into the wall mere metres from George's head. "Shit!" A voice shrieked. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, George caught a flash of his attacker as they dove out of the way of a throwing knife. They were female, nimble on two lean satyr's legs, wearing a two-pronged pirate's hat.

"Get the fuck away from him!"

Dream crouched in his open window, shadowed by a ring of gentle moonlight that made the edges

his mask twinkle. He looked like something straight out of the storybooks George's father read to him while he was a child.

The attacker froze, scuffing her hooves along the floor. "You can't beat all of us," she said. "If you knew what was good for you, you'd escape before you were slaughtered."

Dream stepped into the room and unsheathed his axe. "Not without him. Get the fuck out of here."

His voice warped into a distant warble. George realized he was shaking. He tried to stand but found he could barely feel his legs. The two figures fighting before him tumbled in and out of a grainy darkness, saying things in voices George could not understand. One reached for him, but George's hands felt like they were made of ice. He could not reach back.

He tried anyway.

"George!"

Someone was slapping him. He lay on his stomach, face pressed against the dewy grass. His whole body hurt like it had never hurt before.

"George!"

George cracked open an eye. Dream's unblinking mask stared back at him, oddly jarring against his frightened body language. He had one hand on George's shoulder. "Thank fuck," he breathed.

"What—" the sound of his own voice sent a wave of nausea through George's head. Gods, his side felt like it was on fire.

"Schlatt was right," Dream said. "The Eretians invaded. They sent an assassin to kill you."

No. No, no no. George's heart dropped. Instinctively, he rose to get up, desperate to return back to his kingdom. Dream pushed him back down to the ground with a stern but gentle hand. "My kingdom," George wheezed. His bare feet scrabbled in the dirt. "I have to get back—"

"Stop." Dream's hand seemed impossibly strong. "You're injured. Stop moving."

"My fucking kingdom!" George spat. He managed to shove Dream's hand off of him but made it no farther than a couple steps before collapsing once more. The air around him had no oxygen; George felt like he was drowning.

Dream wrapped both arms around him and gently pushed George's knees in from behind, twisting him back to the ground. George's side hurt so badly it brought tears to his eyes. "You need to lie still," Dream said in his ear. George had never heard him talk so gently. "You kind of got a knife to the back, Your Highness. I don't have more bandages to spare if you bleed through these ones."

George went limp in his arms, shuddering. He was so cold. "What the hell happened?" He whispered.

"Eretians. Lots of them." Dream laid him on the cool ground. "They've taken over the castle."

George lifted his hands to his face and pressed his palms into his eyelids. "Gods, no. Not now. Not now, please."

"You're injured pretty badly and the kingdom's in hysterics. We need to keep moving outwards before the Eretians start sending patrols to come find us."

Dream rose to his feet, scanning the area. They were in a roofed forest, cut off from all moonlight. George could barely make out Dream's figure. A horse nickered nearby.

"Come on." Dream slid his arms beneath George's back and thighs, heaving him into the air. George squirmed instinctively, sending a wave of pain down his legs. "Dude! I said stop moving!"

He maneuvered them both onto the horse's back with surprising ease. "No saddle?" George mumbled. He'd never ridden without one before.

"I didn't have much time to spare, your Highness," Dream said irritably. He was considerably nicer when George was on the ground in agony. "Lean forward, grab onto the horse's mane, and squeeze your legs. If you fall, you're getting back up here on your own."

George bit his tongue. *Don't bite the hand that just saved your ass*, he told himself. The horse's mane smelt of hay and animal fur — a relaxing scent, given their situation. Dream reached over him and grabbed the reins in one hand. "Ready?"

"Where are we going?"

Dream kicked the horse into action without replying. The forest passed by them in murky blurs. George's lips stung in the cold. Dream's thick cape flapped behind them, whipping the air in loud cracks that echoed in his ears. "Where are we going?" George repeated, practically screaming against the wind and the clanking of Dream's armour.

"To an old friend!" Dream bowed low, pressing George to the horse's neck as they took a sharp turn. George's thighs were shaking with the effort of keeping himself upright. *There was a reason I never liked riding horses*, he thought miserably.

"You suck at this!" Dream yelled, wrapping an arm around George's midsection. "Have you never ridden a horse before?"

"Not like this!"

The horse made another sharp turn, whinnying shrilly. They rode for what felt like hours. The plates of Dream's armour dug into George's back and his breath on the back of his neck was suffocating. George's mind wandered to his castle and those inside of it. Quackity. The cooks. The nursemaids who'd practically raised him when his mother died. He'd abandoned them all. It would be his fault and his fault alone if the Eretians harmed them.

The self-hate in George's gut was colder and sharper than any gust of wind or blade.

Why'd you have to die, Dad? Why'd you have to leave me in charge of a kingdom when I'm barely old enough to know who I am?

The horse came to a quick halt. "Get off," Dream ordered. "We're here."

"Huh?" George's head was swimming. Dream slipped off the horse's back and reached up a hand to him, beckoning impatiently. The gravel beneath his bare feet stung as he hopped off, making him wince. "Where are we?"

Dream didn't answer. He'd already walked several feet ahead with the horse in tow, into a small clearing surrounded by thick forest. From what George could see, it was completely empty. "Bad! Bad, it's me! Dream!"

"What the hell are you doing?" George walked into the moonlight, avoiding several massive

weeds in the grass.

Dream wagged a hand in his direction. “Bad! Bad!” He screamed into the open air. “It’s me, buddy!”

“Have you lost your fucking—“ the words died abruptly on George’s tongue. The air in the small clearing was rippling. *Rippling*, like disturbed pond water. Dream pumped a fist in the air, whooping triumphantly. A strong shiver ran up George’s back, nearly sending him to the ground. He winced, murmuring in discomfort, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Hello?”

The hand was not Dream’s. It belonged to a man (was it a man? George wasn’t even sure) dressed in all black, sporting a hood that masked most of his inky face. He smiled widely, displaying sharp teeth. “Hi! I’m Bad.”

“A demon.” The words passed his tongue before George could stop them. Dream cleared his throat aggressively.

“ *Half*-demon,” Bad corrected gently. “Have I ever met you before? You’re not familiar to me.”

It was then that George realized that the environment around him had changed. The small clearing had disappeared; what stood around him was a quaint cottage, complete with a farm, animal pen and a massive outdoor fire pit that housed a large cauldron. Several skeleton horses clattered happily in the stable attached to the side of the house. “Huh?” Was all he managed to say.

Bad giggled. “You’re definitely new. One of Dream’s friends?”

“He’s the king of the SMP kingdom, Bad.” Dream breezed past them, beckoning them both into the house. The horse was tied to one of the farm posts, munching away at a pile of carrots he’d ripped from the garden. “We need help.”

“It seems you do!” Bad replied. “The poor king is in his pyjamas!”

“You can call me George,” George said quietly. He collapsed onto the nearest chair he found and inspected his banged up knees. “No royal titles needed here.”

“Well, let me get you some—“ Bad cut off sharply, distracted by Dream aggressively closing his curtains. “Dream? You don’t have to do that. Nobody can see this but us.”

“The Eretians invaded, Bad! There are probably assassins combing these woods!” Dream said. “I can’t take any chances.”

Bad nodded understandingly. For a half-demon, he seemed incredibly kind. “Well, I’ll get you two some more clothes. You’ll freeze to death in those jammies, George.”

“Get him a health potion too,” Dream called. “He got a knife to the back.”

“He got a what?” Bad jolted, staring at them with wide white eyes. “Skeppy! Skeppy! Do we have glistening melons?”

He darted from the room, leaving George and Dream alone. Dream sat down on the small, dusty couch and cracked his neck.

“Thank you.”

Dream stopped. “What?”

George pulled his feet up and wrapped his arms around his knees. “You saved my life. Thank you.”

It took a moment for Dream to say anything. “Oh, I—” he pulled his hood down and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I thought you didn’t do the whole thanking thing.”

“I can’t just not do it. You’re the only reason I’m alive right now.” George chuckled humourlessly. “Nearly a decade in and now you’ve finally got some action. You get to be the bodyguard of an exiled king. Lucky you.”

“We’ll get you back,” said Dream sternly. “I promise.”

“You never struck me as an optimist.” The stab wound in George’s back pulsed painfully. He just wanted to sleep. “They’ve already taken control, Dream. We’ve got no chance.”

Bad returned with a health potion and a stack of bandages, fluttering about like a mother hen. A blue robot-like creature poked its head around the corner, looked at George with wide eyes, then scurried upstairs.

“That’s Skeppy,” said Bad. “He’s my friend. I made him.”

Dream perked up excitedly. “You finished Skeppy?”

“I did!” Bad smiled. “George, take off your shirt for me, please.”

George did as he was told, wincing as Bad poured a cupful of healing potion onto his wound. “I thought I was supposed to drink that!” He mumbled.

“You are, yes.” Bad handed him the vial and motioned for him to drink it. “But pouring a cupful onto a flesh wound is a good way to stave off infections. Hurts like a muffinhead, but it works pretty darn well.”

He re-busied himself with his work, wrapping George’s torso with the bandages. He felt miles better than he did before, but the pit in his chest remained. He’d been invaded. Practically exiled. He had no one.

“George?”

George turned his head. Dream pointed a finger at his vial. “Drink up, your Highness.”

“I hate these potions,” George mumbled, knocking a large gulp back and grimacing at the strong taste. “They taste like shit. I hate melons.”

“You are so spoiled,” Dream said. Bad tutted him gently.

George took another swig, feeling energy return to his bones. For good measure, he rolled up his pant legs and doused his knees with the last little bit. It stung so badly it made his eyes water, but George wouldn’t risk an infection.

“I have clothes for you, George.” Bad sat back on his heels. “Want me to pack food for you guys? Where are you going?”

“The Antarctic Empire,” Dream said.

“The Antarctic Empire?” George spluttered. “Why there?”

“Why anywhere else? We can reach it in less than a week and King Phil will help us, I’m sure of it.” Dream adjusted his mask as it slid up his face with the movement of his mouth. “We’ll have to avoid the main highway in case of assassins, but the forest isn’t too dangerous when you’ve got a sword and a lantern on you.”

“Have you lost your mind? We’ll be slaughtered before we get there!” George cried.

“Phil is our only hope! Would you rather go to Schlatt?”

“No, I—“ George rubbed his temples. “Dream, you’re setting us up on a suicide mission. We don’t know what the hell is in that forest!”

“It is pretty dangerous, Dream,” said Bad with a small frown. “You’d be better off fighting assassins than ravager herds and massive spiders.”

“No,” Dream replied firmly. “We can’t be out in the open. It’s too dangerous.”

George scoffed. “I don’t even have armour!”

“Bad can provide some!”

Bad sighed, rising to his feet. “I never was able to sway that thick head of yours once it latched onto an idea. I’ll give you the best armour I have. Skeppy’s great at mining, so it’ll be replaced soon enough. No netherite, though.” He wrapped his arms around himself as if chilled by a sudden breeze. “I don’t go into the nether.”

Dream stepped forward and wrapped Bad in a tight hug. “You are a lifesaver, man,” he said softly. “I promise I’ll bring it all back. I owe you one.”

Bad rolled his snowy eyes and smiled. “Just be safe. That’s all I ask, okay?”

“I’m the best knight in this whole area.” Dream pulled back and began unbuttoning his chestplate. “I’ve got this all under control. Now, do you have a shower or bath? My shower plans for tomorrow morning were a little offset and I smell like a dog shat on me.”

“Down the hall and to the left. Don’t use my good towels!”

Chapter End Notes

Tommyinnit voice SORRY SORRY SORRY

this is why I don’t post chaps when I’m drunk

A Good Demon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“King, huh?”

George leaned his chin in his hand, breathing in the herby smell of the cottage. “Yep. Nearly three years now.”

Bad passed him a plate of cut-up chorus fruit. “I can’t imagine the pressure.”

“It’s not horrible, really.” George inspected a piece of chorus fruit and popped it into his mouth. It was sour, tingly on his tongue like a soda or wine. “I’m much better off than some people in my kingdom.”

“Is this your first assassination attempt?” Said Bad. He sat down across from George, holding a steaming cup of tea between his inky hands.

George chuckled. “Nope. Second, actually.”

Skeppy moved into the kitchen, whirring quietly and clicking to himself as if lost in deep thought. *What an odd creature*, George thought to himself. *He looks like he’s made of diamond.*

“Are you going to tell me that story or am I going to have to bully it out of Dream later?” Bad laughed, giving Skeppy a pat as he rolled past.

“Gods, I can barely remember it!” George leaned back in his chair, stretching his sore ribcage. Skeppy let out a series of musical beeps as he disappeared into the living room. “It was well before my dad died; I must have been fifteen or sixteen. A man snuck into the stable and hid in my horse’s stall.”

The memory brought a wave of uneasiness up George’s back. He took another bite of chorus fruit. “When I came out the next morning for my morning lesson, he was there waiting for me.”

Bad’s hand closed around his own, grounding and warm. “That sounds awful.”

George chuckled again, more to stop himself from crying than anything. “The only reason he didn’t catch me completely off guard is because I noticed my horse being more skittish than usual and went to check on her instead of going straight for my saddle.”

He let out a long breath, forcing the tightness in his chest to relax. “He had a... a little serrated fish knife. Those fuckers cut through flesh like butter.”

“Do you want me to get you a drink?” Bad asked.

“I’m fine, I promise.” George ran a hand through his hair. “Well, I thought I was a goner. The guy gave me a good slashing up the arm and was going straight for my neck when, out of nowhere — Dream!”

Bad giggled. “Dream!”

“Dream!” George exclaimed. “Out of nowhere! It was the craziest fucking thing! Bowled the guy right over like he was a damn ravager or something. The guy freaked the hell out and was

screaming at the top of his lungs like a ghost.”

Recognition flickered in Bad’s eyes. “Wait. Dream’s told me about this story. That’s when he—“

“Got his mask, yeah.” George’s voice weakened. “The guy got at his face pretty badly. Nearly blinded him. My dad thought he’d be too recognizable if people found out what happened, so we kept the whole incident hush-hush and never let anyone see Dream’s scars. He’s worn that mask ever since.”

“Gods.” Bad looked down into his tea and sighed. “You poor kids. I’d keep you here with me if I could.”

“You’ve done more than enough,” George smiled. “I can’t thank you enough for the armour and supplies.”

“Dream and I go way back — farther than you two, actually.” Bad popped a couple pieces of chorus fruit into his mouth. “I was his friend when he was a little forest urchin. Dream kept me alive when the rest of the world wanted me dead.”

Bad paused, turning his head in the direction of the bathroom down the hall. “You’re lucky to have him as your bodyguard,” he said, voice soft with fondness. “There’s really nobody like him.”

George looked away, focusing his attention on the herd of cows grazing outside the window. “He’s good at his job; I’ll always give him that.”

Bad raised an eyebrow, but thankfully didn’t press for more of an answer. Dream came walking into the kitchen, wearing a black tunic and a pair of dark green trousers. “Fucking hell, Bad!” He exclaimed, tightening the straps of his mask. “Potion pockets! Where have these been all my life?”

He pivoted to the side, displaying the large pockets on either side of his hips. “I’m stealing these pants. You’re never seeing them again.”

Bad laughed. “Take them! I haven’t worn them for years. You look much better in them than I ever did.”

Dream struck a silly pose, blowing a quick raspberry in Bad’s direction, then reached over George’s shoulder to grab an unceremonious handful of his chorus fruit. “Hey!” George said. “I’m still your king; you have to treat me with respect. Don’t think that just because I don’t have a crown on my head that you can treat me like one of your knight buddies!”

There was a long moment of silence. Dream froze, dropping a couple pieces of chorus fruit onto the floor. “It’s just fruit, man,” he replied slowly. “Chill.”

He reached forward and dropped the pieces back onto the table beside George’s plate. Bad grimaced awkwardly. “I can cut up another one if you’d like.”

“We’re fine,” George answered quickly. *Go take a long bath and drown in it*, he wanted to say. Leave it to Dream to get on his nerves within five seconds of walking into a room. “Do you mind if I get a couple hours of sleep? I want to be ready if we’re travelling tomorrow.”

“Of course! There’s a spare bedroom upstairs. It was meant to be Skeppy’s, but I forgot to program a sleep-mode into him,” Bad chuckled, rubbing at one of his horns. “I’ll bring blankets up for whoever is sleeping on the floor.”

“Don’t bother; I’m not sleeping,” said Dream. He sat down at the small table, pulling George’s

plate of chorus fruit to him with a single finger. “The room is all yours, your Highness.”

“In that case,” George said, rising to his feet. “I think I’ll be off to bed. Thank you for the food, Bad. My kingdom will be in your debt for your kindness.”

“Make your bed when you wake up and we’ll be even, King George,” Bad replied with a smile. “Sleep well. You know where I am if you need anything.”

~

George had never slept in a bed that was not his own or his father’s. Never once.

Bad’s pillows were squishier than his own. The sheets were less silky, the covers less warm, the air somewhat empty without the lingering scent of a fireplace to lull him to sleep. George pulled the blankets up to his nose, wanting nothing more than to disappear into a void of comfort and forget about the hell he’d been thrown into over the last twelve hours. The shock of the situation had long since settled deep into his bones, too deep to cry or anguish over. In fact, George felt rather apathetic. He knew he *should* care, that this was probably the thing he would care the most about in his entire life, but the thought of feeling so much emotion only served to drag him down further into exhaustion.

George tossed and curled in on himself, feeling sweat bead on the back of his neck though wasn’t even cold. His hands were dry. His healing stab wound ached. Every part of his body screamed *this is wrong! This is wrong! This is all wrong!*

“Go to sleep,” George mumbled aloud, as if his body parts could hear him. Their silent cacophony of discomfort continued, though, and George closed his eyes in defeat.

At some point, he fell into a restless sleep, and for the first time in years... he dreamt of Dream. A smaller Dream. A younger Dream, being carried out into the yard in the arms of one of the older stablehands, screaming for help as blood gushed from the awful wounds carved into his face. George pressed a hand to the slice on his own arm, feeling it sting. A bloody fish knife lay at his feet, covered in dirt and dust and pieces of hay.

“I can’t see! I can’t see! I can’t see!” Dream’s voice was high, cracking, full of anguish. The stablehand lay his writhing body in the grass and leaned over him, yelling words George could not hear. There were people everywhere — around him, around Dream, around the handcuffed, howling man in the corner.

The eyes of George’s potential assassin were brown, so light they looked yellow. He was missing a tooth on the upper left side of his mouth.

That was all George remembered of him. Somehow, that was still too much.

“Your Highness?”

George’s eyes felt like lead. “What?” He mumbled.

“It’s time to leave. We have to be on our way soon.”

George forced an eye to open. Dream stood in the doorway of his room, shadowed by the gentle lamplight of the hall. The sun had not yet risen. “What time is it?” George asked blearily.

“Just before dawn. We should get going while it’s still dark.” Dream walked into the room and placed a pile of clothes on his bed. “Get dressed and meet me outside. No complaining.”

George buried his face in his pillow. “I really don’t like you right now.”

“The feeling is mutual,” Dream replied flatly. “Be up in five minutes or you’ll have to deal with me being pissy all day.”

“Go saddle the horse. I need more time.”

“We’re not taking the horse.”

George raised himself onto his elbows, staring at Dream with incredulous eyes. “We’re not taking the horse? Are you insane?”

“Horses are a liability. We need to feed it, give it a place to sleep. Horse shit leaves trails, remember? We can’t be tracked.”

“Holy fuck—“ George fell back into his pillow with a dull *thump* —“I think I could kill you right now. I really could.”

Dream sighed in annoyance. “I’m trying to keep you alive, not keep you comfortable. It’s time to live rough, your Highness.”

“Get out of my room,” George said. “Let me get dressed in peace.”

Dream turned on his heel and left, hands raised defensively. “Five minutes!” He called from down the hall.

George dressed quickly, feeling the residual aches of his healing wounds permeate every one of his limbs. Dream had given him a simple pair of trousers (decently warm given how thin they looked, but just a little bit too long for George’s legs) along with a white tunic with billowing sleeves. They weren’t as well-made as the clothes he had at home, but he figured not much out here would be up to his prior standards. *I wish I had my goggles*, George thought longingly. *Everything looks so saturated without them.*

Dream and Bad were already outside when he finally darted into the yard, rummaging through a sizeable backpack sat on the ground. Bad smiled up at him as he neared, baring two small fangs that poked over the edges of his lips. He had a thick swatch of blue fabric over his knee. “George!” He said happily. The sliver of sunrise that crested the trees made his horns look like they were glowing ever so slightly. “Dream forgot to give you this. It’s probably not king-quality, but it’ll keep you warm.”

He rose and wrapped the blue fabric around George’s shoulders, fastening it over his sternum with a golden clip. *A cape!*

“You look good in blue,” Bad smiled. He reached over George’s shoulder, pulling a loose hood over his head. “And it’s got a hood, too! No chilly ears for you.”

George felt a piece of the cape between two fingers and marvelled at its weight and softness. “Is this wool?”

“Yep!” Bad knelt back down across from Dream and helped him stuff the remaining cans of food into the backpack. “It’s a lifesaver at night time.”

“Alright,” Dream stretched his arms over his head. His own cape was thrown loosely over one shoulder, exposing the stretch of skin across his collarbone where his tunic had come undone. He was tanner than George remembered. “That should do it. Provided we don’t get distracted along

the way, this should be more than enough to last us to the Antarctic Empire.”

“Are you sure?” Bad asked. “I don’t want you guys getting caught in a bad position.”

“We won’t. I’ll make sure of it.” Dream clicked his fingers in George’s direction. “Ready to go, your Highness?”

George curled his lip. “Don’t snap your fingers at me.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Dream said with poorly-hidden exasperation. He flicked open the compass hung from his belt. “The highway is southwest from here, so we’ll go south for a mile or two and then travel parallel alongside it. Got it?”

George rubbed at his heavy eyes. “Somewhat. I’ll just follow your lead.”

They said their quick goodbyes to Bad, who gave them each a quick kiss on the cheek as they left, and were on their way just as the sun became a pinkish ball on the horizon. George wasn’t at all accustomed to walking long distances, but the boots Bad had given him were supple and warm and protected his feet from the puddles of dew. In the morning light, the forest looked quite beautiful. George had never really been in a forest before — not one without a pre-made path or trail way, at least. This one truly seemed *wild* in every sense of the word, and its novelty to George made it all the more exciting. A dashing red fox scampered between the trees a couple feet away, holding the corpse of a rabbit between its jaws. It froze in its tracks as they passed. George looked into its wide, glassy eyes and chuckled to himself as it skittered away.

They passed beneath a hulking red mushroom the side of a tree. George reached his hand up and ran his fingers along the rubbery surface. “Whoa,” he said aloud.

“Don’t touch those,” Dream replied without turning around. “They could give you warts.”

George scowled. “That’s a myth.”

“I lived in the woods for the first twelve years of my life, your Highness,” said Dream. “I think I know a little more about the wilderness than you do.”

George wiped his hand on his cape. Dream ducked, narrowly avoiding a jutting branch that George then had to stumble out of the way of. “Really?” George said angrily. “Are you trying to injure me?”

“Are you trying to be a spoiled brat?” Dream replied under his breath. George gritted his teeth. *A week more of this. I think I’d rather have been executed.*

Not much more was said for the next long while besides a couple more passive-aggressive insults and a half-hearted “Watch out! Tree branch!” From Dream that came a second too late to be actually useful. Gods, George would have killed to have Quackity there with them. He needed to *talk* to someone. Someone that wasn’t Dream. A dead tree could hold a smoother conversation than he could.

But Quackity was at home, in the castle, along with everyone else in George’s life. George didn’t even know if they were alive. Eret’s soldiers wouldn’t kill innocent people, right?

Innocent people who had valuable information on him?

Who’d have maybe seen him leave?

Right?

“I need to stop,” George choked out. His legs felt like they would collapse beneath him. The weight of the cape around his neck was unbearable.

“What now?” Dream said. “We’ve only been walking for a couple hours.”

George leaned against a tree, fighting off a wave of sudden nausea. “Fuck off, I—” His breath felt hot in his throat. “Fuck off.”

Dream turned around and froze. “Are you okay?”

“I think I’m going to puke.”

He collapsed over a fallen log and vomited bile and half-digested chorus fruit into the dirt.

Quackity is dead, his mind screamed at him. *Quackity is dead and the maids are dead and the cooks are dead they’re all dead all dead all dead because of yOU BECAUSE OF YOU COWARD YOU—*

There was a canteen being pressed to George’s lips. “Drink,” Dream ordered. George coughed out another mouthful of vomit, leaving his throat burning. “Drink,” Dream repeated. His hand slid itself beneath George’s chest and pulled him backwards until George was sitting on his heels. “Come on, George. Come on.”

George grabbed the canteen with shaking hands and gulped down a mouthful of sour-tasting water. “Aether almighty!” He gasped. His throat was so tight he could barely speak. “What’s happening to me?”

“I don’t know, but you need to chill.” Dream unbuttoned George’s cape with a deft hand and laid it out on the ground. Then, with surprising tenderness, he guided George onto his side and sat beside him as George’s body shook uncontrollably.

“Fuck you, I can’t *chill* —” George gasped in a mouthful of air that seemed to have no oxygen. “I feel like I’m fucking dying.”

“Breathe, George. Breathe,” Dream said calmly.

George wanted to throttle him. “Stop being so fucking patronizing!” He spat.

“I’m not being patronizing!” Dream tugged at his hair in frustration. “You’re having a fucking seizure or something! What the fuck else am I supposed to do?”

George swung an arm up and bashed his palm into Dream’s sternum, making him grunt. “Leave me alone! I can handle myself.”

His voice died out as another mouthful of bile came forth, wracking his body with shivers. Dream rose to his feet, hands balled at his sides. “Fine! You come to me when you’re ready to go. Aether fucking almighty.”

He stomped off, leaving George alone. *Breathe*, he thought. *Breathe, George, breathe. You’re an adult. You don’t wig out like this anymore.*

Wig out. Gods, George hated that phrase. *Wig out.* It’s what his father always used to say when he’d have nightmares or cry because he was so afraid of the horses that it would make him break out into hives. *You can’t wig out like this anymore, Georgie*, he’d say to him. *You have to be big*

and strong.

George exhaled deeply, fighting the tremors in his chest that want to rip sobs from his throat. Then he breathed in as slowly as he could muster. *In, out. In, out.* The tremors passed and faded to nothing. *Be strong, George.* The nausea lessened and the pressure behind George's eyes gave way to the gentle ache of exhaustion. Tentatively, he sat up. Dream had left the canteen abandoned by his side, so George took another swig of water to rid the taste of vomit and humiliation from his mouth. *I better not have gotten puke on this cape. That would just be adding insult to injury.*

He picked the cape off the ground as he stood on shaky legs, shaking it to rid it of dirt. To his relief, it looked relatively clean. Wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve, George fastened the clip of the cape over his chest and made his way to where Dream sat on a nearby log just out of view, sharpening a small dagger. "Done yet?" Said Dream without looking up at him.

George felt himself flush. "Yes, thank you. Let's get going."

Dream stood with a small grunt, hefting the backpack at his feet back over his shoulder. "Fantastic. Let's try not to have any more —"

His words died abruptly. With his mask on, George could not read his facial expressions, but the fear in his body language was palpable.

"Don't turn around," Dream whispered. "Walk to me. Slowly."

George's stomach dropped. He took two hesitant steps forward, hyper-aware of every forest noise. "What's behind me?"

Dream held a finger to his mask's mouth, shushing him quietly. A low growl drifted through the air from behind him.

"Oh, fuck. Run!"

Chapter End Notes

BADBOYHALO POG

what did y'all think of Dream's backstory??? I wonder how he feels abt his mask now

I've currently got chapters 6,7, and half of 8 prewritten and ready to go once I do some editing! So look forward to those!

don't worry, the story will start picking up soon >:)

-OpheliaBloo

Boy King

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gods, George hated running.

“What the hell is that?” He screamed at Dream, who sprinted between the trees and rocks with enviable agility.

“A Ravager!” He shrieked. “We need to get to a river or stream! Any large body of water!”

“Why?”

Dream took a sharp turn, grabbing George’s hand to keep him from falling behind. His palms were clammy and George had to squeeze hard to keep his grip from slipping. “Why the fuck do you think? It can’t swim!”

George’s lungs were on fire. Had it not been for the adrenaline coursing through his veins, he would have surely collapsed. He was not built to run. He wasn’t built to do much at all.

The same could not be said for Dream. Despite having a heavy backpack and a bumbling George to take care of, Dream wove through the trees at incredible speed. “Up ahead!” Dream let go of George’s hand and swung the backpack off his shoulders. There was a pond ahead, surrounded by reeds. “Take off your cape and jump!”

George’s brain took a moment to register what he’d been told. He fumbled with the clip at his chest, blood roaring in his ears, and had just felt the material fly off his shoulders when the ground beneath his feet fell away and he crashed ass-first into a stagnant pond. In his panic, George opened his mouth to scream and felt his throat flood with murky water, throwing his body into a panic that only subsided when Dream grabbed him by the collar and thrust him upwards to the surface.

“Get the fuck away!” Dream was screaming. His black tunic had pieces of algae stuck to the sleeves. “Yeah, that’s right! Fuck off!”

George opened his stinging eyes, catching the rear-end of a juvenile ravager as it lumbered away from the edge of the pond, huffing loudly. Dream waded to the water’s edge and poked his head over the side of the outcropping they’d fell over. The bottom strap of his mask had come undone, leaving it flapping against his chin as he spoke. “I think it’s gone.”

“Aether Almighty,” George pushed himself forward and climbed rather clumsily back onto the grass. He was soaked from head to toe. “This day can’t get any worse.”

“Oh, I’m sure it can,” said Dream. He ripped off his sopping tunic and wrung it out over the pond. “Strip and air out your clothes. You’ll get sick if you don’t.”

“I am not getting naked in front of you!” George spluttered.

Dream rubbed his mask as if he were pinching the bridge of his nose. “You don’t have to get naked, you prude. Just take off your trousers and tunic. Those are what matter. You’re welcome to have damp undies for the rest of the day if you so wish.”

“Turn around. I don’t want you seeing me in the nude.”

Dream let out a loud groan. “You are so fucking annoying.”

“I am your king! Do what I say!”

Dream turned and faced the forest, mumbling curses under his breath. George stripped as quickly as he could, chilled by the mid-day breeze, and wrung as much water out of his clothes as he could before hanging them on a nearby tree. Luckily for him, there was a rock by the pond that had been warmed by the day’s sun, so George wrapped himself in his cloak and sat cross-legged as he combed his fingers through his knotty hair.

“Can I turn around now?” Dream asked.

“Yeah.” George’s fingers caught on a snag, making him wince. “But if you’re going to get your dick out, you can stay out of view.”

Dream appeared beside him, naked except for his underwear and mask. “Scooch,” he said gruffly.

George’s cheeks grew warm. “You’re naked!”

“And?” Dream plopped down next to him, sitting on the edge of George’s cape. “I’ve been around you every day for nearly a decade, George. We’re kind of past the point of performative modesty. Plus, this stone is warm and my ass is so cold I can feel my balls retreating back into my body.”

“Gross!” George focused his eyes on a leaf floating by on the pond’s greenish surface. Laughing quietly, Dream stretched a leg out and dipped a foot in, creating gentle ripples that overtook the leaf and sunk it. Dream had nice legs. His physique had always been something George secretly envied. He was slender, but not scrawny like George was. Years of training had carved deep muscle lines into the curves of his arms and calves. And then there were the scars. Dream had many of them. George envied those too, in some strange way. They were stories, proof that he’d faced danger and obstacles and overcame them. Proof that he was strong.

George didn’t have a single callus or scratch to his name.

“You know,” Dream said. “You should at least try to not actively hate me while we’re on the run from assassins. It’ll make this whole journey a lot easier for the both of us if you loosen up and let yourself take a joke.”

George tucked his legs up to his chest and rested his chin in the groove of one of his knees. “I don’t hate you. You’ve saved my life several times now.”

Dream mimicked George’s pose and pulled his knees to his chest. “Well,” he said quietly. “You don’t like me.”

“*You* don’t like *me*, actually.”

“Only because you’re a stuck-up prick whenever I try to make conversation.”

George felt tension build along the back of his shoulder blades. “Sorry I can’t be one of the boys with you and the rest of the knights, okay? I have a kingdom to run.”

“Well, sorry I can’t be one of your high-and-mighty royal buddies you sip tea with!” Dream cracked his knuckles. His voice had taken on a hard edge. “You’re not better than me just because you’re a king.”

“I’m not even a fucking king anymore!” George had his hands on Dream’s shoulders before he realized what he was doing, gripping so tightly his knuckles were white. “I ran away at the first sign of danger! I abandoned everyone!”

He pushed Dream backwards with all his might, sending him tumbling down into a small patch of muddy sand. “The only reason I’m alive right now is because you’re here to babysit me twenty four hours a day!”

All the fear and rage he’d forced down over the last twelve hours came rushing up his throat and he doubled over, choking into his hands. Dream stared up at him, bewildered. “Gods,” George moaned. “I’m fucking useless. I should have never been king.”

Dream was silent for a moment. George sobbed into his balled-up fists and felt the burn of humiliation up his neck and face. *Fucking pathetic.*

“Well,” Dream said stiffly. “It seems you needed to get that out.”

“Oh, fuck off!” George pulled at his hair until it stung. “You can drop the cocky act now. I get it. I’m a spoilt little prince and you’re better than me in every way possible. I get it!”

For the first time in his life, Dream seemed speechless. George’s rage ebbed away as they sat there in uncomfortable silence, leaving him feeling even smaller than before. He was so cold out here in the forest. He just wanted to go home.

“Do you know that I can’t read?”

George blinked. “What?” He asked.

Dream rose unsteadily to his feet, rubbing his elbow. “I can’t read,” he repeated with a small chuckle. “Like, at all.”

“But I’ve handed you notes before!”

“And I stare at them and nod pensively until you lose track of what you’re doing and take them back. I can’t read anything besides my name, and even that is hard when it’s not in Sapnap’s handwriting.”

George put his head in his hands and massaged his throbbing temples. “Why are you telling me this now?”

Dream shrugged. “I don’t know. Thought it might make you feel better. You can read.”

“You’re so annoying.” George found himself chuckling, wiping his tears with the corner of his cape. “You are so fucking annoying.”

“I made you stop crying, though!” Dream said proudly. “You actually laughed at something I said! I’ve been waiting nearly ten years for that.”

“Congratulations,” George sniffed. “You got me to laugh at a stupid remark mid-breakdown while I’m nearly naked on a rock with pond water in my hair. Impressive.”

“Hey, let me be proud of this.” Dream sat back down next to him and dusted a layer of sand off his shoulder. “We don’t have to be friends. But loosen up a little, man! You’re kind of stuck with me.”

George’s slight grin faded. *You’re kind of stuck with me.*

You'll always need me.

“Go check on the clothes,” he said quietly. “We should get going.”

“But, I—“ Dream deflated. “Fine. Okay.”

He left without another word, taking with him the slight bit of peace that had snuck its way into George's heart. A gust of passing wind raised goosebumps along his bare spine.

You will always need him to protect you.

Chapter End Notes

heatwaves chapter 9 got me Feeling wow

question for those reading! Who are you excited to see more show up in this story:
Ranboo or Sapnap?

God I may post my prewritten chapters and just update as I go bc I'm so impatient
Imaoooo

-Ophelia

Door To Hell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Alrighty, we’re stopping here for the night.”

George looked around them. There was nothing but forest as far as he could see; certainly no place to build a tent. “Where?”

Dream pointed upwards, into the thicket of branches that made up the ancient tree under which they’d stopped. “Up there, your Highness. These trees are perfect to sleep in.”

George balked. “Are you pulling my leg?”

Dream hopped up onto one of the low branches, too engrossed in his climbing to answer immediately. “We don’t have to go too high; fifteen feet or so should be enough to get us out of any mob’s eyesight.”

He skittered up several more branches in the blink of an eye with the ease of a squirrel. “Come on! Get up before it gets dark! We’ll want time to get comfy.”

Good gods in the Aether above.

George placed an unsure hand on one of the lowest tree branches and grimaced as the tree bark flaked beneath his fingers. “This is not safe!”

“Nothing is safe out here!” Dream called down to him.

“You know I can’t climb all that well, right?” George hefted himself up onto a waist-high branch and felt the sensitive skin of his healed stab wound sting as it was pulled. Dream was feet above him, moving around as if looking for something. Swallowing the fear in his throat, George pushed himself up two more branches and paused. “How to we make sure we don’t fall as we sleep?”

Dream looked down at him. His white mask looked quite out of place surrounded by tree branches. “Luck!” He said.

“Luck?”

“Luck! I hope you’re not a sleep-roller.”

George swung his leg over the branch on which Dream crouched and pulled himself into a seated position. They were far too high up for his liking. “It would be easier to figure out if you were being sarcastic if I could see your face.”

“Nope!” Dream answered immediately. “Not a chance. We don’t know when we’re being watched.”

Before George had the chance to answer, Dream swung their backpack off his shoulder and shoved it in the fork between two nearby branches. “Get up here. We’ll eat a little before bed and then try to get a couple hours’ sleep.”

“It’s your fault if I fall and break my back,” George mumbled, scaling the rest of the way with the remainder of his energy and collapsed in another fork in the branches was just big enough to sit

back in somewhat comfortably. His tired legs were happy for the rest.

“Here.” Dream handed him their canteen and the end piece of a loaf of bread. “Dinner is served.”

George hadn’t realized how hungry he’d become, nor how thick and dry his tongue felt in his mouth. Gods, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d skipped a meal at all, let alone gone the whole day without a bite to eat. “Thank you.” He said. The water felt like a healing potion on his sore throat. The bread wasn’t as good as the loaves he had at home, but it had nuts and seeds in it that seemed to bring life back to his withering muscles.

Dream tucked himself back into his own little fork of branches with a slice of bread between his hands, oddly at home amongst the leaves and small twigs. “I love bread,” he said, picking a piece off and sliding it under his mask. “When you’re on the streets, managing to steal a whole bread loaf was pretty much equal to finding an enchanted golden apple in terms of excitement.”

“You can take that off, you know,” George said quietly. “The mask, I mean. Nobody’s around.”

Dream shoved another piece of bread up his mask and paused. His shoulders curled in slightly. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he replied. “I can eat with it just fine.”

“It can’t be comfortable wearing it twenty-four hours a day.” George bit down on a seed and felt it crumble in his mouth. “I haven’t seen your face at all since we were teenagers. Has anyone?”

Dream leaned back, catching his mask on a stripe of sunlight that made it glow orange. “Not really. I’ve gotten used to being behind this mask. I didn’t really have a choice to begin with.”

“I won’t make you wear it anymore, if you want. I don’t care if you have scars. We both know the whole ‘undercover work’ story was bullshit anyways.”

Dream opened their canteen with a long squeak and turned his head to take a long drink. George caught the faintest glimpse of his lips as his mask rode up. “I’m fine, George. I don’t want to take it off.”

“So I’ll just never know what you look like?”

Dream did not answer for several long moments. George trained his eyes on the multicoloured sky and tried to imagine how his castle was faring back at home.

“No, I guess you won’t,” came Dream’s quiet voice. “I guess you won’t.”

The rest of their meal was eaten in silence. George somehow felt hungrier than before he’d eaten. If Dream felt the same, he did not show it outwardly. Perhaps he was just used to going hungry.

A passing breeze sent a chill down George’s spine. He pulled the hood of his coat up and felt it tickle his ears. He’d never liked wool, given how it made him so itchy he wanted to pull his skin off, but Bad certainly hadn’t been lying when he’d said it would be a lifesaver at night.

“Is your cape wool?” George asked.

Dream shook his head. “Nah. But it’s warm enough anyway.”

George frowned. “It doesn’t look it. It barely goes to your ass.”

Dream unclipped his cape and threw it over himself as if it were a blanket. “I’m not as soft as you are. I’ve survived in much worse with much less.”

“Alright, nature boy.” George rolled his eyes and settled deeper into the cocoon of warmth he’d created in his cape. “I get it. You’re tough and invincible and strong.”

Dream crossed his arms and fell silent. *Did I say something wrong?* George wondered.

“Is it safe for both of us to be asleep at the same time?”

“Eh,” replied Dream. “I barely sleep for more than ten minutes at a time anyway. We both need rest.”

“That’s not healthy.”

“It hasn’t killed me yet.”

“Don’t die, please,” George chuckled, closing his eyes. “If you do, I’m bound to die a horrible death in the following twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, come on.”

No more was said, but the silence that overcame them as they drifted off to sleep was comfortable. If George tried hard enough, he could almost imagine himself back home, asleep in his bed with the smell of his fireplace lulling him to sleep. Dream would be there too, just outside his bedroom door. Watching. Protecting.

Underneath the vast expanse of the sky, George was for once glad for Dream’s presence. He was a link between George and this big, unfamiliar world in which he felt so small. George still would not consider Dream to be a friend, but as he stretched his arm into a stripe of moonlight and let it illuminate the long, fading scar on his forearm, he felt warmth form in his chest. Respect, maybe? Solidarity? George wasn’t too sure.

Whatever that feeling was, it felt nice. George fell into a dreamless sleep, warm beneath his cape, and woke only when the moon had long since begun its slow decent behind the mountains.

Dream was gone.

“Dream?” George shot up straight. “Dream!”

He went to rise to his feet, forgetting that he was quite literally *in a fucking tree* and only barely managed to stop himself from crashing to the ground by throwing himself backwards and grabbing onto any nearby branch he could. His cape slipped off his shoulders and fluttered to the forest floor, leaving him in only his tunic. The brisk morning air raised goosebumps along his arms. “Dream!” George yelled. No answer. Their pack was still where it had been left, seemingly untouched.

George looked over the side of the tree and thankfully didn’t see any Dream corpses crumpled on the ground. The remains of a skeleton lay in a pile in a patch of sunlight, being nibbled on by a fox that dashed away when it caught George staring. Anxiety began to crawl its way up his neck like a spider. Dream would have woken him up if there was danger, right? At the very least, would a creeper explosion have?

George bristled with the cold. *Fuck. I need my cape.*

With about as much grace as a newborn foal, George painstakingly shuffled his way back down to the ground and picked his cape off the dewy grass. Great. It would probably be damp for the rest of the day if they didn’t get a couple hours of good sun.

“Dream!” George called out once more. “Dude! Where the hell are you?”

“George!”

Dream’s voice was faint but intense. “George!”

George felt a sudden burst of terror. “Dream!” He screamed. He sprinted in the direction of Dream’s voice, cape clutched between his hands, leaving their pack nestled up in the tree. Branches whipped as his face and arms but George barrelled through them anyway, heart in his throat, and had just reached a small clearing in the trees when something slammed into him from behind. George whirled around, stunned by a jolt of fear, only to see Dream doubling over with his hands on his knees.

“Dude!” Dream’s voice broke off into a wheezy laugh. “You ran right past me! Did you not hear me?”

“What—“ George’s head was swimming. “Dude! You scared the shit out of me!”

“I just went to piss,” Dream started. “Then you will not *believe* —“

“Fucking hell!” George collapsed into a crouch, eyes pressed up against his knees. “You can’t just run off like that. What if you got attacked?”

The humour in Dream’s voice wavered. “I’m fine. I was only gone for a couple minutes.”

George groaned. “What if one day you’re not fine? What if I don’t know?” He said, irritation crackling in his veins. “You’re not invincible, Dream. I’d like for you to actually take this seriously and not run off whenever you fucking feel like it. It scares me.”

The smile plastered on Dream’s mask was jarring in comparison to his tense body language. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“You left me completely alone without knowing where you were! Use your fucking head for once!”

“Hey!” Dream jabbed a finger at George’s chest with so much force it made him stumble backwards. “Do not fucking imply that I am stupid. We are *not* going there.”

George had never heard Dream so angry. “I wasn’t *implying* anything—“

“Just stay here.” Dream shoved past him and started on his way back towards their tree with his fists balled at his side. “I’m getting our pack. Don’t move.”

He disappeared into the brush without another word, leaving George alone and colder than before. *Well then*, he thought with a stab of guilt. *I definitely ruined the mood for the morning.*

Dream returned a minute later with their pack slung over one shoulder. “Come on. I found something.”

His voice was flat, void of its previous excitement. George felt another stab of guilt. “What did you find?”

“An abandoned nether portal. It’s intact and everything.”

George stopped in his tracks. “We’re going into the nether?”

Dream let out an exasperated sigh. “We could be in the Antarctic empire by the end of the day if we go fast enough. It’d be stupid to pass up this opportunity.”

“Neither of us have armour! Or gold! We’d be slaughtered!”

Dream fiddled with one of the small pockets in the backpack and took out small pieces of flint and steel. “Piglins are not smart creatures. All we need to do is avoid the big herds and we’ll be peachy keen. They stay near their bastions anyway.”

“Absolutely not,” George said sternly. “No fucking way.”

“Whose job is it to lead right now?” Dream snapped.

“Mine! I am your king! You listen to what I say!”

Dream’s body shook with the force of sudden fury. The beady black eyes of his smiling mask bored into George’s skin. “To—“ he caught on his word and George could hear his teeth grit with rage— “To hell with this king shit. Your crown means *nothing* out here.”

He raised his chin and advanced on George with a finger outstretched. “I’m going into the nether whether you like it or not. I don’t give a fuck if you follow me. Right now, you could hand yourself over to an assassin for all I care.”

Their backpack landed on the ground at George’s feet. “Your choice, your Highness.”

Dream turned on his heel and stalked off, tinkering with the flint and steel in his hands. George’s feet seemed unable to move for the next couple moments as his brain fought to understand what the *fuck* had just happened. *You fucked up*, began the familiar chant in his brain. *You’re fucked without him. You’re nothing without him.*

“Dream,” George’s voice came out as a pathetic stammer. “Dream, wait.”

He picked up the heavy backpack and lugged it over his shoulder, darting after Dream’s retreating figure. As they neared the portal, the acrid stench of burning soil filled George’s nose. *My dad always said you could smell a portal before you saw it. He really wasn’t kidding.*

Unlike the clean, meticulously-maintained travel portals George had been near, the one Dream had found bore the marks of age and wear. It was obviously man-made, but whatever had built it was certainly long-gone. Coils of ivy had made their home in the grooves of the obsidian, blackening as they grew too near to the portal’s centre. Though the portal itself was unlit, the effects of the purple haze and what had once come through it snuffed out any flora that dared to bloom too close.

Dream crouched by the portal in silence, giving the flint and steel a few test rubs before lighting an arc of sparks with a flash of his hand. The portal burst to life, hissing and moaning as if it were in pain. Ice crawled down into the pit of George’s stomach. “Please,” he whispered. “Don’t make me go in there.”

Dream turned his head to the side. George felt his eyes on him. “Give me the backpack,” he said simply.

George clenched his jaw as he felt a lump rise in his throat. “Come on, Dream. Please.”

“I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

George handed him the backpack, feeling no less heavy as the weight left his fingers. Without

another word, Dream leaned into the purple haze and disappeared.

Gods, Dad, whoever is out there: help me.

The air of the nether smelt like smoke. Not like smoke of a fireplace, but of the thick black smoke that enveloped forests and houses and snuffed all life out of whatever was unlucky enough to get caught inside it. George buried his face in his cape, holding back his coughs as Dream scanned the area with both his axes in hand. They'd appeared in a small valley, lined with a mountainous structure of netherrack on one side and a crimson forest on the other. George felt so bare, so naked. He wasn't even armed.

"This way," said Dream. He had a compass open in one hand. "Once we find a highway or a travelled path, we'll be on our way in relative safety."

George barely wanted to move. "What if there are assassins out here looking for us?"

"Then we'll fight them off."

George turned back and looked at the portal behind him. How inviting it seemed now. The back of his throat stung.

"I guess we will."

Chapter End Notes

I wonder what will happen in the nether??? The nether is such a fun and safe place for young dumb men without armour :))

how is everyone liking the story so far? This will most likely end up being even longer than A Very Odd Family, Indeed. I have so many ideas and lots of relationship dynamics to explore

-Ophelia

Hotheaded

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George had been only ten when his father had left to conquer a nether fortress. He'd begged his father for months to stay behind, to allow his knights to go on without him and bring back the wither skulls needed to summon that awful beast his father was so desperate on beating themselves. But his father had been adamant on his presence. *He* needed to be the one to carry the skulls home. *He* needed to be the one to slay the Wither beast. *He* needed to be the one to lay the nether star in the beacon and bring light to the kingdom. For him, it was a matter of pride.

That is where George and his father differed. George had no pride. He was no more than a puppet king; a child left behind by his father in a throne that barely fit him.

A month later, his father had returned, three wretched skulls in hand. Within the week, the Wither had been brought to life and slaughtered. They placed the beacon in the town square for all to see.

Four of the seven men his father had journeyed with did not return from the journey to the nether fortress. Their bodies could not be returned to the overworld, so they were buried in the nether with all of their gear.

~~Probably because it was too infected to be salvaged.~~

"Fuck, I'm thirsty," George mumbled. A crimson vine squealed as it was crushed beneath his boot. They'd been walking for over two hours, and the heat of the heavy nether air had long since forced him to remove his cape and carry it bundled between his hands. The material of his tunic was slick and wet against his back.

Dream passed him their canteen without looking back. Though they'd somewhat gone back to speaking terms, the weight of their argument still hung in the air. "Be fast about it. Water starts evaporating immediately once you open the lid."

George unscrewed the canteen lid and pressed it to his lips, taking a couple quick gulps of water. It had grown warm over the hours since they'd been in the nether but was refreshing nonetheless. George felt the couple drops left on his lips hiss and bubble as he screwed the lid back on. He wanted to drink more, but they had ration what little water they had lest the rest of the journey be downright miserable. Being a little thirsty was manageable; being downright dehydrated was not.

"How far are we from the highway?" George asked. They'd seen nothing but crimson forests and a single soul sand valley since they'd arrived. Every moment that passed without them finding a nether highway or path only served to make George more anxious. He hated it here. He hated the stench, the sweat beading on the back of his neck, the way every small noise sounded like the wail of a nearby ghast. If they weren't out of this awful place by the end of the day, George would lose his mind.

Dream checked his compass. "I'm not sure. All the highways go north, so we must be running parallel to one right now. We'll turn west once we get out of this forest and will hopefully hit one then."

"Fuck," George moaned. "I want out of this godforsaken place."

"We haven't even run into a single piglin yet!" Said Dream. "We've seen less danger here than in

the overworld.”

“I don’t care!” A shiver ran down George back though he was the farthest thing from cold. “I hate it here. I hate every bit of it.”

They walked for some more in silence, Dream stopping every couple minutes to study the compass some more and mutter to himself under his breath. In all honesty, George thought they were lost. The blasted crimson forest they were in seemed to go on forever. He nearly pissed his pants when a zombified piglin stumbled out from behind a tree, dragging a sword at its side. *“Whatever you do, don’t hit one of those boys,”* George’s father had once told him over dinner. *“They won’t mess with you until you hit one of ‘em. And when you mess with one, you mess with them all.”*

“Oh, shit.”

George bumped into Dream’s back as he stopped in his tracks, stiff as a board. They’d arrived at a small outcropping that dropped off into a massive lava lake. “Oh fuck,” he muttered. “This isn’t good.”

“What?” George asked nervously.

“I see the highway. It’s across the lake.” Dream pointed to the faded shape of a railway and walking path arcing over the small netherite hills across the boiling, bubbling body of lava. “There’s only one way across the lava lake, though.”

His finger moved to another looming figure, half-hidden in the ashy fog. George’s stomach dropped.

A nether fortress.

George’s feet reacted before his brain did, and he was stumbling back into a tree before he realized he was moving at all. “No.” He dropped his cape on the ground and brought his hands up to grab at his hair. “No. No. Absolutely the fuck not.”

“We have to, George.” There was a twinge of guilt in Dream’s voice. “If I’d have known, I would have gone another way.”

“Absolutely fucking not!” George cried. “We are not going near that damned thing!”

“We have to! There’s no other way!”

“Then we’re turning back.” George bent down on shaky knees and picked his cape up off the ground. “I’d rather face a thousand assassins than put one fucking foot in that fortress.”

Dream made a sharp noise in the back of his throat. “Your Highness—“

“No!” George said sharply.

“I’d feel more comfortable protecting you in there than in the overworld.”

“I don’t give a shit. My final answer is no.”

“We have no choice! The portal is hours back! We may not even be able to find it again!”

“I said no !”

A group of nearby zombified piglins started at the sound of George’s raising voice, snorting

curiously. George wiped at the sweat beading on the back of his neck. “No,” he repeated, quieter this time. Dream stared at him, still and silent, looking tense but not afraid. “I can’t go in there. I just can’t. I’m sorry, Dream.”

Dream turned and stared at the jagged fortress entrance looming mere yards away from them, black in the dim nether light. A blaze wandered past one of the fenced windows, shining a kaleidoscope of orange light onto the brick windowsill. They were near enough to see the rolling black eyes suspended in its mass of hazy light, trained on something out of view.

George could smell ash. It made him want to sneeze.

“Then we’ll compromise.”

Dream’s voice was quiet, uncharacteristically soft. He swung their backpack off his shoulders and dug a small vial out of one of the side pockets. It glittered in his hand, emitting a gentle light that turned his fingers pink.

George’s lungs seemed to lose their air. “An invisibility potion.”

Dream held it out in front of him. “Eight minutes. Plenty of time to get through that fortress. No mobs will even notice you’re there.”

“But what about you?”

“I don’t fear what’s in there — you do. So leave the fighting to me and you’ll never have to step foot in one again.”

Dream took a step closer, placing the vial into George’s hand. The glass was warm. “I’ll stay out of sight and you can just breeze through there like you own the place. In and out, no trouble at all.”

George closed his eyes. The light of the invisibility potion cast shadows on the backs of his eyelids.

“Please, George. We don’t have time to turn back.”

Fuck me.

In one swift motion, George tipped the vial over his head and poured it on himself. It stung like scalding water at first, then gentled into a tingly coolness as it sunk into his hair and skin and the material of his clothes. George looked down and watched as his hands darkened, darkened, until he was staring through them at the netherrack below him. Dream’s breath caught in his throat. “Gods,” he breathed. “I’ve never seen it in action before.”

George leaned forward and handed the vial back to Dream. “It’s part of royal protocol. You have to know how to disappear quickly if needed.”

Dream started, breaking the strange atmosphere of peace that surrounded them. “Alright. It’s go time. Follow me.”

~

To say that being invisible in the place of his nightmares was odd would be an understatement.

This particular fortress seemed to be mostly empty, which was relieving. Dream got startled by a passing magma cube once or twice, but they hadn’t run into a single blaze or wither skeleton since they’d set foot onto the fortress itself. George was still wary, though; Dream, with no armour,

couldn't afford to be caught off guard. Wither poison was nothing to be fooled around with.

If he tried hard enough, George could imagine his father tromping through the long, dark hallways, killing all the monsters in his path. How many wither skeletons had he killed to get those skulls?

Dream skulked ahead of him, smooth and light on his feet in every way George was not. He held one of his axes in one hand, a shield in the other. Every minute or so, he'd let out a low whistle, and George would whistle back.

I'm still here. Keep going.

They hit a dead end; one of the many they'd seen since arriving. The fortress may have been blissfully empty, but it was a near labyrinth in terms of trying to navigate their way through. Muttering, Dream turned around and tried another corridor, only for it to loop and bring them back to where they'd began. George felt his anxiety grow with every passing second. Eight minutes could pass at any moment. Then he'd be stuck there, unarmed and vulnerable.

"Can we speed up? I only have a couple minutes left!" He hissed in Dream's ear.

Dream pushed past him and jogged down another hallway, leading to a garden of nether warts they'd already seen twice. "I'm trying!" He said, slightly too loud for George's liking. "This place is like a fucking maze!"

They turned two more corners and exited out onto a long, roofless corridor. Dream raised his shield above his head as a ghost's fireball rocketed over them. "Fuck! Come on!"

George followed at his heels, heart thumping so loudly in his chest he was surprised Dream couldn't hear it. *I should have known this wouldn't go smoothly.*

"Fuck!" Dream took a sharp turn sideways, nearly sending George smashing into the decaying chest of a wither skeleton. George's knees nearly collapsed under him. Rasping angrily, the wither skeleton clambered after Dream's retreating figure.

Terror coursed through George's veins like ice. "Wait—" he clapped a hand over his mouth as the wither skeleton whirled around, jaw clacking like a broken puppet. They were taller than he expected, smelling of decay and soot. How his father had managed to kill enough of them to bring home three skulls was a complete mystery in George's mind.

"George!" Dream's voice cried out. Holding back a scream, George ducked beneath the arm of the wither skeleton and sprinted towards him. A flash of colour caught his eye and *fuck* — his hand was visible. He instinctively stuffed it into the pocket of his pants only to realize that his pants were visible as well. Every damned inch of him was so awfully *visible*, down to his flapping cape that looked like a beacon against the nether's overwhelming redness. The fear that clawed its way up George's throat was hot and painful and sharper than any blade he'd ever seen.

How are things going wrong so quickly?

Dream stood a couple feet ahead of him, teetering on a broken ledge, facing to the side with his axe raised defensively. "Dream!" George screamed. "Help!"

Dream turned to face him, mask askew on his terrified face. He raised his outstretched palm and what little George could see of his mouth opened to form a single word.

"Stop!"

Chapter End Notes

HEEHOO poor boys!!!! Should have packed more potions :)

Mr. Beast's rewind today destroyed my brain so I'm distracting myself with writing props to you, pissbaby! You got all our hopes up! I hate Leo men /j

-Ophelia

Red Wounds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Boom .

Hot orange light exploded before George's eyes, enveloping Dream in a burst of soot that stung George's eyes. Dream's scream ripped through the air. "Dream!" George shrieked. A blast of incredible heat arced past his face, leaving his cheek burning. "Dream, where are you?"

He reached forward blindly, catching the material of Dream's tunic in his fingers. Dream jerked about erratically, trying to cough and scream all at once. "Dream!" George cried. He heard Dream's axe clatter to the floor, sliding off the jagged edge of the nether fortress with a loud screech. Dream grasped at George's arms, fingernails digging into his flesh. The stench of blood and burning material hung thick in the air.

Heat exploded on George's back, pushing him forward. The ground beneath his feet gave way, sending he and Dream careening downwards. George landed on Dream's shield with enough force to rip the air from his lungs and leave him hacking. *That'll fucking bruise*, he thought. Wiping his burning eyes, George noticed a crumpled figure beside him and felt his heart stop.

"Dream!"

A rasping from above caught George's attention as he rolled off his side and onto his aching knees. A figure stared down at them from over the nether fortress's ledge, jabbing a sword in their direction.

"Fuck off!" George screamed at the wither skeleton. "Fuck right off!"

The dark silhouette retreated, taking with it George's fear-induced adrenaline. He collapsed back onto his heels, breathing heavily as his brain fought to keep itself calm. "Dream?" He murmured.

Dream merely moaned. He was curled on his side, motionless except for the rapid rising and falling of his chest. His axes and shield were scattered around him, seemingly forgotten. One of his hands was pressed to his shoulder. His breathing quickened as George put a tentative hand on his side and rolled him onto his back.

"Holy fuck! Dream!"

The entirety of Dream's left arm, shoulder and neck were covered in blood and ash. George felt bile rise up into his throat. Several pieces of black shrapnel had gotten stuck in the wound, deepening the cuts with every movement of Dream's body.

"*Oh—*" Dream hissed through his teeth as he tried to sit up. "Oh no. Oh no. Not here. Not here."

George gently pushed him back onto his uninjured elbow. "Don't move!" He looked around in a panic. There was a small cave carved into the netherack wall a couple feet away. "There's a cave over there. Let me help you."

He maneuvered Dream's arms out of the straps of their backpack and slipped himself beneath the crook of Dream's good shoulder. The stripe of skin along the back of Dream's neck and ear were clammy and flushed bright red. "There's a healing potion in the backpack," Dream grunted,

moaning in pain as George practically dragged him into the small cave. He collapsed against the far wall, panting. “Small pocket, left side. It’s bright pink.”

George grabbed the backpack and darted back inside, digging through every pocket he could see until he pulled out a vial of glimmering pink liquid. “This it?”

Dream nodded, reaching out his good hand. George hesitated. “The shrapnel. We have to get it out before you drink this.”

“Give it to me,” Dream said sharply.

“It won’t do shit if there’s stuff still in the wounds! Infections will still get in!”

Dream went to move forward, growling, but his injured side left him paralyzed. “George, give me that fucking potion right now or I think I’ll kill you.”

George swallowed and set his jaw. Dream’s body softened. “Please, George. Please.”

“Not until I get that shrapnel out.” George set the potion behind him and dragged the backpack in front of him. “What’s in here?”

Dream leaned his head back on the wall and whined through his nose. His injured arm twitched uncontrollably, spilling the blood pooling in his palm onto the floor in dark droplets. “There are bandages—” he cut off abruptly, sucking air between his teeth. “There are bandages in there somewhere. Scissors too, I think.”

I need tweezers, George thought with a stab of anxiety. “I didn’t know blaze fireballs had shrapnel in them.”

“Me neither. I guess we both learned something today.”

George dug out a handful of cloth bandages and set them beside him. There weren’t nearly as many of them as he would have liked, but they were certainly better than nothing. He found the long, thin pair of scissors a moment later, tucked safely into a drawstring bag embroidered with the initials *B.B.H* on them in neat stitching. *Come on, George. Stay calm. His life is in your hands.*

George pulled out the half-empty canteen. “Do you want water?” He asked.

To his surprise, Dream shook his head. “Save it. Just give me the fucking potion.”

“No!” George snapped. He grabbed the scissors and bandages in one hand and inched closer, ignoring how Dream pressed himself closer to the wall in an effort to distance himself. “I’m getting this shrapnel out of your shoulder if it kills me.”

“I think it will,” Dream said, “Because will kill you if you come anywhere near me with those fucking blades.”

Something shifted under his mask as he forced himself to lay farther back. George’s mouth fell open.

“Is there shrapnel in your fucking *eye*?”

Dream’s legs convulsed as if overcome with the instinct to run. “No!” He said immediately. The fear in his voice made George hesitate. “Gods. Fuck. This can’t get any worse.”

“How did you get shrapnel in your eye?”

"I don't know, your Highness," Dream hissed. George noticed a trickle of blood leaking out of the bottom of his mask and felt his stomach churn. "Why don't you ask the fucking blaze?"

George gritted his teeth and reached for the edge of Dream's mask, only for Dream to shriek and bat his hand away. The piece of shrapnel hidden beneath Dream's mask must have shifted with the movement, as a fresh spurt of blood dribbled down Dream's chin and onto his chest.

Alright. Different approach.

George took a deep breath. "Dream, it's about time I pay you back for all the times you've saved my life. Let me save yours. Please."

In the moment Dream seemed to be stunned by his words, George scooted himself a little closer. The musty scent of blood on the air was so strong George could nearly taste it. A long shudder wracked Dream's body, making him groan. "I'll get your face patched up," George continued softly, "Give you some water, and you can put the mask back on while I fix up your shoulder."

"No," Dream whimpered. "No. I don't want this."

George placed a gentle hand on Dream's uninjured shoulder, and when Dream didn't fight back, brought his hand up and around the back of Dream's head. He rested his fingers on one of the leather straps, feeling the warmth of the little metal buckle on his fingertips.

"Close your eyes," said Dream quickly. "I want to decide when you open them."

"Roger that," replied George. His heart was in his throat. *Why is this such a big deal? I've known the dude for years. I'm just seeing his face.*

George hadn't seen Dream's face since the accident. So much time had passed that Dream's face was a vague, blurry image in the eye of George's mind, a conglomeration of every other dirty-blond young man he'd seen over the years. The more he tried to think about it, pin it down in his mind's eye, the more the image changed.

George closed his eyes and felt the first buckle come loose beneath his fingers. "All right down there?" He said to Dream.

"Just get it over with." Dream's voice was tight as if he were about to cry. Perhaps he was.

George moved his hand farther down into the mess of Dream's knotted waves. The second buckle came undone and the mask slipped forward, hitting George's chest with a small *thunk*. Leaning back, George let the mask slide down Dream's body and land between them on the floor.

"You can—" Dream's breath hitched. "*Fuck.*"

"I can wait for a moment if needed."

Dream chuckled tearfully. "Now *I* think I'm having a fucking seizure or something."

George smiled. "Well, at least let me open my eyes before you die. I want to see you before you're a corpse."

"Fine. Just do it. Open them."

So George did.

A moment passed.

Then two.

“I didn’t know you had freckles.”

Dream blinked. “That’s... *That’s* what you notice first?”

“Yeah, I mean. They’re nice.”

Dream stared at him with wide eyes. Or, rather, with a wide *eye* — a layer of half-dried blood had the other one closed. Dream’s eyes were green. How had he never noticed?

“How do I look?” Said Dream. One of the long white scars that covered his face slashed over both lips, leaving divots in the places where the wounds had never fully healed.

“Not as bad as I thought,” George tore his eyes away from Dream’s mouth and focused on the long needle of shrapnel lodged into the flesh of his brow bone. By the grace of the gods, it had missed his eye. “You get to keep both eyes.”

Dream smiled. He had a big smile. “Oh, thank the gods.”

For the first time in years (or perhaps for the first time at all) George laid his hand on Dream’s cheek and grabbed the sliver of shrapnel with two fingers. “It’s big enough to do with my hands. On the count of three, okay? One, two —“

The shrapnel slid loose with a slight tug. Dream winced. “Ow.”

What an odd thing to have inside a fireball. George twirled the obsidian-like needle of shrapnel between his fingers, inspecting it closely. “Well,” he said. “That wasn’t too bad.”

He reached behind him and uncorked the healing potion. “Close your eyes,” he told Dream, who complied with a slightly curled lip. “This’ll sting.”

He poured a couple drops of the healing potion onto the small wound, causing Dream to shriek and grab at George’s leg with a white-knuckled hand. “I’d really rather be drinking that thing right now!” He grumbled.

“Then let’s start on your shoulder.” George grabbed the canteen and uncapped it. He pressed it to Dream’s lips. “Drink. You need it.”

A couple drops of the healing potion went on the scissors too, just for good measure. George didn’t know where they had been or what they’d touched, and giving Dream an infection wouldn’t do wonders for their budding sort-of-friendship.

“Alright,” George readied the scissors over a large chunk of shrapnel just under Dream’s clavicle. “Try not to scream too much.”

Picking shrapnel out of someone’s shoulder with a pair of scissors was easier than George had thought. Dream remained mostly silent, grunting in pain if George’s hand shook a little too much, but the shrapnel had been made slippery from all the blood and didn’t put up much of a fight when tugged on. Within minutes, George had Dream’s shoulder de-shrapneled (was that even a word?) and clumsily wrapped in cloth bandages. Dream probably could have done a better job bandaging himself up, but George’s handiwork would have to do for the time being. Dream looked so exhausted that he could barely keep his eyes open.

George sat back and crossed his legs, rubbing at his eyes with the backs of his hands. “Holy shit. I

can't believe I just did that."

Dream finished the rest of the healing potion and coughed. "Me neither. You did well."

His hand fell to his side, limp with fatigue. The empty vial rolled from his fingers, hitting the toe of George's boot. George picked it up, made sure the cork was secure, and placed it neatly back in their bag. It could be useful to carry some extra water. "Need anything?" He asked gently.

Dream shook his head. His hair was heavy with sweat, stuck to his forehead in loose waves. "I just need to sleep," he mumbled.

"I guess that means I'm on night watch, huh?" George chuckled.

The corner of Dream's mouth that was dimpled with slash marks twitched. "You can sleep too if you'd like."

"Oh, I'm joking. I'll keep watch. You need sleep more than I do."

Dream settled into his small nook, wincing as his shoulder moved. "Thank you, George. You definitely saved my ass."

George chuckled quietly, wiping a layer of sweat off the back of his neck. "I'm finally useful! Get yourself in trouble a couple million more times and we'll be even."

"You've always been useful. You're the king of a whole country, for gods' sake!" Dream replied.

"Oh, hush about the king stuff. Anyone could do what I do." George's stomach rumbled; he ignored it. "You're the best swordsman from here to the Antarctic empire. You don't just happen upon talent like that."

"It gets old when it's all you're good for," Dream sighed. "There's a reason knights aren't taught to read or write."

"I'll get you a tutor if we get my kingdom back. That's a promise." George slid himself up the wall by Dream's head and felt a chuckle bubble up in his throat. "All the other knights can come too. I'll have the most literate army in the whole continent."

A toothy grin made its way across Dream's face. "The Eretians won't know what hit them when I start pulling out four-syllable words."

"King Eret himself will shit his pants. No sword needed! Just me and my army of men who know how to read."

"I'm going to sound so smart," Dream giggled. "I'll just scream every big word I know."

"Discombobulation!" George raised his hand as if he were parrying a sword.

"Erectile disfunction!" Dream repeated. "Sapnap taught me those ones!"

He then exploded into loud, wheezy laughter that shook his body from head to toe. "Shut up!" George whispered, pressing a hand to Dream's mouth though he could barely keep the grin off his own. "You sound like a fucking kettle! Are you trying attract every hoglin in the area?"

Dream batted his hand away. "You go fight them! You're useful now!"

They fell into another fit of childish giggles, interrupted only by the distant wailing of a ghost

outside that startled them into silence. “I can’t believe I’m actually having a normal conversation with you. You’re actually *laughing*,” said Dream. “I must be dying or something.”

“Mortal danger brings anyone together, I guess.” George replied with a small smile. “Everything is so shit right now that all we can really do is laugh about it. It’s either that or cry.”

Dream chuckled but said nothing else for a long while. His eyes drifted shut, lulled to sleep by the rhythmic popping of the lava nearby. George laid down next to him, cape bunched beneath his head like a pillow. Netherrack was surprisingly spongy and not too uncomfortable to lay on.

Only for a minute or two, George told himself. *I’m just going to doze.*

“George?”

George turned his head. Dream stared back at him, holding his mask against his chest as if it were a comfort animal. His eyes glimmered in the gentle light. “I’m sorry for snapping at you this morning. I didn’t mean what I said.”

George reached up and patted Dream’s bloodstained hand. They were cool. “I know you didn’t. It’s alright.”

George quite liked the way Dream smiled at him as he closed his eyes. He looked comfortable. Unencumbered. Content and nothing else.

George closed his eyes and let himself fall into a warm sleep.

Chapter End Notes

dream face reveal pog??? Heheheh

writing nether lore is so mf fun like seriously minecraft gets gruesome as hell when you try to make it realistic

once again, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Y’all seemed to really like the cliffhanger! I hope this provided you with all the serotonin you need 😊

but the action isn’t over yet >:)

-Ophelia

Feverish

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The fact that George knew little to nothing about the nether was a fact he would admit readily. He avoided it during travel when possible and tuned out his father's dinnertime stories about his adventures for the majority of his childhood. He'd grown up comfortable and soft, happy with the knowledge that any trip to the nether would be guarded, controlled, with a box of fire resistance potions under every carriage seat if anything went awry. The privilege of not needing to know much about the nether was one George took full advantage of.

However, despite his unwillingness to listen, George's father had made one thing crystal clear to him: the nether had two killers. The first one was obvious, the subject of every horror tale that parents used to scare their kids away from portals — the wither bites, which sucked the oxygen from your blood and ate away at your veins and muscles until you died in agony, gasping for air that wouldn't come. George had had many a nightmare about those while his father had been away. Every child did.

The second one, though, was rather unexpected. It wasn't the ghastrs, nor the blazes, nor the hordes of piglins that could overtake even the most powerful of warriors with their deadly crossbows. It wasn't the suffocating soul sand, the pockets of lava hidden underground to swallow up any unsuspecting miners, or the gelatinous magma cubes that possessed enough force to knock a man straight off his feet.

The second killer of the nether was a silent one. Many didn't even know its name.

The nether fever.

"George."

There was a hand on George's arm, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

"George."

Icy breath hit George's face, tickling his heavy eyes.

"George, wake up."

"How the hell does that work?"

George's father took another sip of his wine. "When too much nether air hits an open wound, the body freaks out and tries to cool itself down because it thinks it's overheating. It's a reverse fever, really. Body temperature drops, blood pools in your abdomen to keep your organs warm, and then delirium sets in after a while. Sometimes your capillaries will all burst and you'll die from heat exhaustion over the next couple hours. Nasty stuff."

George leaned his chin on his hand. "Hypothermia, basically."

"Right you are, my boy. Heat-induced hypothermia. The deadliest paradox around."

"George. I'm fucking freezing."

Fuck .

George snapped open his eyes, nearly knocking Dream over as he scrambled to his knees. Dream crouched beside him, one hand clutching the sleeve of George's tunic. His mask sat crooked on his face with only one of the buckles done up. "George?" He repeated blearily. "I am so fucking cold. I can't feel my fingers."

He rested a shivering, pale hand in George's lap and stared up at him with wide, spacey eyes. "What's going on? The fuck is happening to me?"

"*Fuck .*" George rolled to his feet and threw his cape over his shoulders. "Get up, Dream. We have to go."

"Huh?" Dream said. His lower lip had taken on an alarming shade of purple. "What?"

George grabbed Dream's hand and pulled him to his feet. His skin was like ice. "You've got a nether fever. We have to get back into the overworld."

"Nether fever?" Dream reached behind his head and fumbled clumsily with the undone buckle until George darted behind him and did his mask up for him. "I thought that was a myth."

"Does it feel like a myth?" George hefted their heavy backpack over his shoulder, ignoring the stain on his neck. "Follow me."

Dream jogged at George's heels as they exited their small cave, arms wrapped around himself protectively. George's thoughts were a whirlwind of fear and grim determination. *I will not let him die*, he forced himself to chant. *I will not let him die. I will not let him die. I will not let him die.*

"Your navigation skills didn't totally fail you, Dream." George pointed upwards to the faded shape of a nether highway that sat along the nearby cliff. "You may not have gotten us right to the nether highway, but you got us close enough for me."

He hopped onto one of the reachable ledges and cried out to the highway above. "Hello! Anyone up there?"

No response came, and George was too nervous to do anymore screaming so near to the fortress. "We'll have to climb," he called back to Dream. "Do you think you'll be—"

His words died as his heart leapt into his throat. Dream crouched by the edge of the lava lake, perilously close, warming his hands mere inches over the bubbling surface. "Dream!" George shrieked. "Get the fuck away from there!"

He crossed the distance between them in a few panicked strides and grabbed Dream by the shoulders, yanking him backwards. Dream's shivering body fell back into George's chest and knocked them both back onto their asses. "The hell, dude?" Dream grumbled. "I was just warming my hands."

"You could have gotten yourself killed!" George replied sharply. He got Dream back to his feet and hurried him to the cliff's edge, glancing around for any lurking ghastrs or piglins. "Climb up, squirrel boy."

Dream put one hand on the spongy netherrack cliff and George noticed with a deep chill that his fingers had reddened. "My ears are stinging," Dream said quietly. "And I have a headache. Can I have some water?"

“When we’re on the highway.” George promised. “Just climb the best you can and we’ll be on our way out of this hellhole.”

I don’t even know how far we are from the portal to the Antarctic empire. It could be hours away. Dream may not even be conscious by then.

Getting Dream up the cliff was more of a challenge than trying to climb up with the heavy backpack himself. Though Dream hadn’t yet begun to become confused or delirious, the strong lethargy that marked the first stage of the nether fever was in full swing, and the fact that one of Dream’s arms was near useless from his injury only added extra difficulty. George ended up having to loop arms with him to make sure Dream’s frail body didn’t fail him and send them both crashing to the ground. “Come on, Dream,” he huffed.

Dream rested his head on the netherrack wall. “I can’t feel my fingers. This isn’t exactly easy.”

George forced himself up a couple more feet, practically throwing his upper body over the side of the cliff. *Thank the gods*, his tired brain sang. “Give me a second,” he said, slipping the backpack off his shoulders. “Grab my hand.”

Dream’s reddening fingers felt even colder than they had before. George tried to swallow his fear, but it was thick and heavy in his throat like a syrup. Dream hefted himself up beside him and curled into a ball, shivering.

“Which way is the Antarctic Empire?” George knelt by Dream’s side and dug the compass out of one of the backpack’s side pockets.

“North,” Dream replied. “Can we take a break, please? I think I’m going to pass out.”

“Absolutely not!” George grabbed Dream’s stiff hand and pulled him to his feet. “We’re going. Now.”

The stretch of highway they’d climbed onto was empty, barren and certainly not as well-kept as the more central highways on which George was used to travelling. The cobblestone was crumbling, overgrown with twisting red roots, and the layer of red dust that covered the road made it clear that it was not frequently travelled. George gritted his teeth and brought the compass out his pocket. *That way’s North. Guess we better start walking.* “We’re going this way,” he said aloud.

Dream groaned. “I can barely keep my eyes open.”

“Then walk with them closed.” George put the backpack on his shoulders and felt it tug at the tired muscles of his back. Gods, he felt like shit. Both of them were in desperate need of food and water and especially rest, but George wouldn’t dare risk wasting a single second of travel time. “Grab onto the backpack and I’ll just pull you along, okay? We have to keep moving no matter what.”

Dream did as he was told, his movement sluggish and slow. There was a sheen of sweat along the backs of his reddened palms. “How are you feeling?” George asked nervously.

“Cold,” Dream replied in a low mutter. “Everything hurts.”

“We’ll get you help at the Antarctic Empire, Dream. I promise.” George was glad Dream could not see his face, for he found himself unable to relax his jaw or shake the fear clouding his eyes. The nether was so awfully *dark* without his goggles on. George felt like something terrifying could jump out of the shadows at any moment.

A quarter of an hour passed without issue. Both piglins and zombified piglins alike knew to stay

away from the nether highways, and the low roof of the forest below kept any wandering ghosts from being able to come too near. And so they trudged along, Dream a heavy weight upon George's back. Convincing him to keep moving became more and more of a challenge as the minutes passed. Dream was near tears by the time George rolled his ankle over a particularly bumpy root and finally forced them to stop.

"Holy shit." Dream fell against the raised ledge and pulled his knees to his chest. "I have never felt so sick in my life. It feels like there are ants in my veins."

George passed him the canteen, now mostly empty. "Drink. You need it."

"I have never been so fucking cold before," Dream hissed.

George rubbed at the sore spot on his ankle. He'd ripped a small hole in the side of his leather boot. "That's the magic of the nether fever — your body thinks you're overheating. That's why we need to get out of this hellscape and back into normal air."

Dream took a sip of the canteen water and grimaced. "Why was I never taught about this nice little phenomena?"

"Fuck if I know," George muttered. "It's not a well-known thing."

"Well it fucking should be."

George rubbed at his temple. "I should have known to cover the wound better. This is all my fault."

"Oh," Dream kicked weakly at George's leg. "Don't start with that. You're the reason I'm alive."

A herd of hoglins in the forest below burst into a cacophony of angry snorts. "There are piglins nearby," Dream said. "We should start moving again."

The reluctance in his voice made George's heart ache. He hated seeing people in pain on a normal day; after all Dream had done for him, seeing him suffer was a special kind of awful. "Sounds good," he replied, trying his best to smile.

Dream chuckled lightly. "Don't trip over any more roots, okay?"

"There's the Dream I know," George smiled. "Trying to keep his stupid little king safe every step of the way."

"Oh, come on now." Dream turned his head away. "It's my job."

They tucked the canteen back into the backpack and began once again on their long journey. A couple minutes in, George felt the gentle pressure of Dream's hands on the backpack lighten, then jumped in surprise as two icy hands came to rest on either shoulder. "Sorry," Dream murmured. "Your skin is really warm."

Dream's hands were comfier than George would have imagined; unsettlingly cold, yes, but quite refreshing in comparison to the suffocating nether heat. "Keep them there," George said. "The cold is kind of nice."

Dream stumbled behind him but did not slow their pace. "Look at us. Such an efficient little partnership."

George raised his hands in the air as if he were celebrating. “Woohoo. I’ll get us a bottle of wine to share if we both make it out of this shit place alive.”

Dream’s hands tightened on his shoulders as if he were giving George a hug. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“You better.”

~

“The fuck was that?”

George turned his head. Dream stood a couple feet behind him, axe and shield raised defensively. “The fuck was that?” He repeated.

The world around them had been near silent for the past hour. “What was what?” George said.

Dream staggered around in a rapid circle, head snapping from side to side. “Do you not hear that? It’s like a fucking grumbling or something.”

“Is it my stomach?” George asked with a chuckle. Dream ignored his attempt at a joke and continued to move from side to side like a nervous horse. “Dream, I haven’t heard anything for over an hour.”

“Well I—“ Dream’s body froze. “Fuck.”

George blinked. “What?”

“We have to run.”

“ *What ?* ”

“I said to fucking run!”

George’s mind was swimming. Dream passed him in a green blur, sprinting ahead on visibly unsteady legs. “Dream!” George cried. “Wait!”

The ankle he’d rolled an hour or so earlier protested painfully as he broke into a quick jog, avoiding the clouds of red dust Dream had left in his wake. *He’s delirious. We’re fucked.*

“Dream! You’re hallucinating!” He tried to scream. “Slow down! It’s alright!”

Dream came to a sudden halt ahead of him, turning just in time to catch George by the arm as he practically smashed into Dream’s chest. “Stay here,” he ordered. “I’m going down there to find whatever the fuck is making that noise.”

George grabbed his sleeve as he turned to leave and wrapped both arms around Dream’s forearm. “No you are not! You’re hallucinating, Dream. We need to keep walking.”

“I know what I heard!” Dream replied angrily. “Let me go!”

“No!” George tightened his grip until his nails dug into Dream’s sleeve. “You are staying here with me whether you like it or not.”

“I’m trying to protect you!” Dream yanked his arm backwards but was too weakened from the fever to throw George off of him. “There’s something down there! It’ll kill us!”

“Then keep running with me!” George cried. “We’re staying together, Dream. You are not running off.”

Dream made a low groan of annoyance. “Fine! Let’s go!”

They took off running again, George barely able to keep pace with Dream as he shot ahead. *Keep him running and keep him in view.* George’s lungs were on fire. His throat was lined with ash. *Hold out for me, Dream. Don’t leave me alone out here.*

Dream crumpled suddenly as if he’d been tripped. George watched him try to rise, only to collapse back onto his stomach and curl onto his side, holding his hands against his chest. “Dream!” George screamed. He practically threw himself onto his knees beside Dream, ignoring how the brick scraped his already sore knees, and rested a hand on the crook of Dream’s shoulder.

“Dream,” George whispered. “You’re *warm*.”

“I’m burning up!” Dream yanked his mask off and threw it across the highway. “I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!”

The blueish pallor he’d possessed for the last couple hours had been replaced by alternating splotches of jaundice and a deep redness that crawled unsettlingly quickly up Dream’s face, neck and arms. His forehead was dry and burning hot against George’s fingertips. “I’m so hot,” he groaned. “I think I’m dying.”

Terror filled George’s chest, sucking the air from his lungs. *Not now. Not yet. Please.* He caught Dream’s head in his hands as his eyes rolled back, fluttering rapidly. “Stay with me, Dream,” George commanded in as strong of a voice as he could muster, “You can’t faint on me. You have to be strong.”

Dream licked at his cracking lips. “Water. I need water.”

The canteen was nearly empty. George gulped, feeling the weight of his own dry tongue in his mouth. “Here.” He wetted the corner of his sleeve and pressed the canteen to Dream’s lips. As Dream drank, George propped his head up on his knee and rubbed at his forehead with the corner of the sleeve he’d doused. The water sizzled and evaporated quickly in the nether air but hearing Dream’s audible sigh of relief as he let the empty canteen clatter to the ground put a slight bit of George’s fear at bay.

Dream’s constricted eyes focused on something behind George and narrowed. “I see...” he mumbled. “I see something.”

George held down his shoulder as he made to get up. “You’re delirious,” He said gently. “It’s nothing.”

Dream squirmed uncomfortably. “No! There’s someone there!”

George twisted around and stared down the expanse of the highway. His heart jumped. Sure enough, there was a lone figure riding out of the reddish fog on a cart drawn by a single hulking horse. George jumped to his feet, waving his hand in the air. “Hey!” He yelled. “Over here!”

The figure kicked their horse to a quick trot upon noticing them, raising their hand as well in acknowledgement. They were human, seemingly male, dressed in black from their hooded cape to their lace-up boots. George noticed with a chill that they wore a purple cage-like mask over their mouth, masking the lower half of their face. The man pulled his horse to a stop before them.

“Hello,” George said nervously.

The man looked them over with narrowed crimson eyes. “Are you two okay?”

His voice was remarkably deep and raspy. George gulped. “No. My friend here has nether fever. We need to get to the Antarctic Empire as quick as possible.”

“Antarctic Empire?” The man looked upwards for a second as if thinking, tapping the reins in his hand absentmindedly. He had several silver rings on his fingers. “That’s about an hour northward. I’ll pass the portal on my way to the Capital.”

Excitement leapt up George’s spine like a current of electricity. “Can we hitch a ride with you?” He said. The man looked them over once more, focusing especially on Dream’s crumpled figure. George leaned in closer, speaking quietly to prevent Dream from listening. “Please. He could be dead within the hour.”

The man closed his eyes and nodded. “Hop on. Don’t let any of my barrels go loose, though.”

George’s face split into a wide grin. “Thank you so much. I’m in your debt, sir.”

The man let out a low but friendly chuckle as George got Dream settled in the back of the cart and only barely managed to swipe the mask from beneath the horse’s hoof before it was crushed. “Call me Corpse. And no need to repay me. Letting you two hitch a ride is no skin off my ass.”

Corpse tapped his horse on the flank with his crop and the cart squealed into motion. George propped himself against one of the cart’s walls and took the first proper breath he’d had in hours. They could be in the Antarctic Empire in a few hours. They could be *safe* in a few hours.

George rested his hand on Dream’s shoulder as he curled up against a box, moaning under his breath. “Don’t sleep,” he said. “I need you to stay awake with me.”

“I feel like I’m going to puke,” Dream replied weakly. His body shuddered, dribbling sweat down his forehead. George felt concern gnaw at the back of his mind.

“It’ll be at least an hour before we hit the portal. Feel free to nap if you wish,” Corpse called back to them.

George pursed his lips. His eyelids were iron-laden and keeping Dream awake any longer than he already had seemed to toe the line into torture. They both needed rest. Desperately. “Fine,” he said, mostly to himself. “We’ll sleep.”

Corpse twisted sideways to give them a thumbs up. “I’ll wake you two up when we get to the portal, okay? Nothing to worry about.”

Nothing to worry about. George’s injured ankle prickled with pain. He ignored it. *We’ll be fine.* Dream tossed and turned in his sleep, murmuring in a voice barely loud enough to hear. *We’re almost there, Dream. Stay alive for me.*

The bumping of the cart was soothing. Dream was beside him, still breathing, still alive.

George rested his head against the cart wall and watched the endless netherrack ceiling roll by.

ohohohoho!!! Little miss Ophie loves her nether lore. It does make her little pea brain so happy.

What do y'all think of this chapter? Enough hurt to deserve some good comfort? ;p

Stay safe and stay cheesin! Wear your masks!

-Ophelia

Beneath The Open Sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Where do you come from, Corpse?”

Corpse started as if startled by George’s voice. “I, uh—“ he coughed. “I thought you were asleep.”

George chuckled in embarrassment. “I’m bored.”

“Ah, that’s fine.” Corpse gave his horse a gentle tap. “I’m a nomad, really. My work has me travel a lot.”

George swung one of his legs over the cart’s side and scooted up until he was sitting by Corpse’s side. His free leg dangled over the cobblestone path, swinging lightly. “What do you do? I saw a whole bunch of knives and shit in the cart. Are you a soldier or hired hand?”

Corpse rumbled out a low laugh. “Not exactly. People pay me to read books aloud to them. It’s a hit amongst rich people.”

George remembered when his father brought in narrators for his tea parties. He had found them to be exceptionally boring. Who wanted to sit and read aloud all day? “Ah, I see. People love the deep voice, right?”

“Yeah,” Corpse chuckled. “What do you and your partner do?”

“My—“ George’s face flushed. “Oh, we’re not — he’s not my— it’s a—“

“Chill out,” Corpse raised a dark eyebrow. “I meant business partners. You two look like hired hands.”

“He’s my bodyguard,” George blurted. “And my friend. It’s a weird situation.”

Corpse nodded. George could have sworn that he was smiling beneath his toothy mask. “A weird situation. Got it.”

I am so glad Dream is still asleep.

Dream hadn’t moved much in the last half hour. George kept a close eye on him, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder or head if he grew still for too long. He’d only continued to grow hotter as the minutes ticked by. Corpse had a small amount of water on him, but Dream sweated out how much he drank almost immediately. And so he lay curled on George’s cape, sweat wafting out from under his mask in steamy vapour as if he were a hot cooking pan. It was odd, to say the least, to see him so vulnerable.

In a small, selfish way, George felt invigorated. He’d *saved* him. He’d actually done something for himself, no help needed. For the first time in his whole life, George felt like a person of his own. It was definitely odd to feel so confident in the middle of hell, covered in dried blood and stinking of sweat, riding on the cart of a scary narrator he’d never met before while the man who’d been tasked to keep him safe lay half-conscious mere metres away, but the word ‘odd’ had become quite familiar to George in the last couple days.

“That’s it.” Corpse pointed forward. A large portal decorated in quartz and lapis and flecks of gold loomed out of the fog, startlingly bright against the nether’s gloomy darkness. George’s heart leapt. *We’re here.*

Two winged guards stepped forward as Corpse trotted up to them, spears raised. Neither of them could have been older than twenty. “Identification?”

Corpse reached into his pocket for his pocketbook, but George stopped him with a gentle hand. “I’ll take it from here.”

Corpse furrowed his brow. “What do you—“

George hopped off the cart, trailing his hand along the hulking stallion’s side as he went. Both guards stiffened immediately. “Your Highness?”

Corpse went still. “*Huh?* ”

George felt his shoulders straighten as he slipped back into his royal role, comfortable and familiar. “Go send a message to King Phil immediately. Tell him that King George and Dream are seeking asylum. Dream is severely injured.”

The guards looked at each other, white-faced, then the smaller sprinted off into the portal’s purple mist and disappeared. George turned back to Corpse, who looked rather rattled, and laid a hand on his leg. “Thank you for your help. I’ll repay you for this when I’m able.”

“No problem, man,” Corpse chuckled nervously. “I mean — your Highness.”

George waved a hand dismissively. “George is fine. You’ve earned it.”

The guard returned with two more guards in tow. “The messenger has been sent, your Highness,” he told George rapidly. “There is first aid supplies waiting for you in the overworld.”

George nodded. “Thank you. Dream’s in the back of the cart. His left shoulder is injured, so be careful when moving him.”

The guards disappeared around Corpse’s cart, reappearing with Dream between them being carried beneath the armpits. “George,” he murmured. “Where are we?”

“The Antarctic Empire,” George smiled. “We made it, Dream. We’re okay.”

Dream’s head lolled onto one of the shoulders of the guards. “Okay,” he said. “We’re okay.”

“Is his shoulder injury the only injury sustained?” Said a tall, red-haired guard as he helped George into the portal. Dream’s knees buckled, sending a ripple of concern throughout the guards as they scrambled to pick him up.

George shook his head. “No. I believe he’s got nether fever.”

The guard froze. “Nether fever?”

A rush of snowflakes hit George’s face like a swinging fist. He blinked instinctively, losing his bearings in the writhing kaleidoscope of wings and guard uniforms as what seemed like dozens of them swarmed around the portal. They were screaming. Someone had a hand on George’s wrist, pulling him away.

“Get him back in the nether!”

“No! Get him inside!”

Something let out a awful, strangled croaking sound. The croaking then shifted, familiarizing itself into a bone-curdling scream George recognized with a jolt of terror.

“Dream!”

A guard swooped in, wings outstretched protectively, and hustled George off to the side. “Get him inside!” One of the other guards cried. Dream’s figure lay on a stretcher between them, writhing and twisting in a way bodies were not meant to. His hands were a dark, sickening purple.

“Dream!” George clawed at the guard’s wings. *I need to get to Dream. I need to get to Dream. He’s dying. He’s dying and it’s my fault.*

The guard holding him back twisted his head and raised a hand in the air. “Prince Technoblade!” He cried. “I’ve got him!”

“Dream!” George dove beneath the guard’s wing, running half-blind through the snowstorm. He could barely think, barely breathe, barely feel his fingers or toes.

Another pair of arms caught him, strong enough to nearly immobilize him. A low voice spoke into George’s ear, yanking him out of his panic-induced haze so quickly it made him nauseous.

“Hold tight. I’m going to fly you to the castle.”

George did as he was told nearly robotically. Prince Technoblade’s dark wings were stark against the storm whirling around them, dazzlingly fast as they rocketed into the air together with George clutching Technoblade’s coat like a lifeline. Within moments they’d arrived at the castle doors and were ushered inside. “Where’s Dream?” George tugged on Technoblade’s sleeve. They passed by a doorway from which two little familiar faces were poking out with wide eyes.

“He’s in the infirmary, sir,” Technoblade replied politely. “He’ll be alright. I promise.”

“I need to be in there!” George said. “Are you taking off his mask? Is he awake?”

Technoblade laid a stern hand on George’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly in what seemed to be an odd attempt at being comforting. “I’ll make sure he has privacy. You may see him when you’ve calmed down a bit.”

“I—“ George put his face in his hands. “I need to sit down. This is all happening so quickly.”

“Come with me. I’ll take you to my dad.”

Technoblade ushered him into a small waiting room with a single sweep of his wing and closed the door behind them. “You can lay down if you’d like. Nobody but my dad is allowed to come in here.”

George hadn’t realized he’d begun to tremble. Staring down at his shaky hands, he collapsed on a blue-cushioned couch and pressed his palms into his eyes. “Thank you, Prince Technoblade.”

“Call me Techno. Royal titles are a mouthful.”

George tried to smile. “In that case, call me George. I get the feeling I may be here for a while, so to hell with the titles and shit.”

Techno bowed his head respectfully. “I’ll go get my dad and check on Dream. You try to relax.

Our team of medics is incredibly talented.”

He turned on his heel and left. For the first time in days, George was completely and utterly alone. *We’re here. We’re safe. We made it.* He tried to tell himself. The pit in his stomach stayed firm. Any relief he felt was muted and empty.

George had never liked being alone.

The door opened once again. George sat up, expecting to see King Phil, but was surprised to see another figure poke its head into the room.

“Prince Tommy?”

“George!” Tommy erupted into a flash of cream-coloured feathers and launched himself into George’s arms before George had processed that he’d even crossed the room. “I was so worried about you!”

Tommy’s downy wings spilled little feathers onto George’s lap as they flapped excitedly. His breath smelt of sour berries. He was a tiny thing, no taller than George’s shoulder, but his grip on George’s chest was as strong as any soldier’s. George hugged him close, pressing his nose into Tommy’s mop of fluffy hair. “Hey, kid. Long time no see, huh?”

Another figure moved in the doorway. It was the half-enderman boy Dream had frightened mere days earlier, playing with his thumbs. George gave him a friendly smile. “I remember you. I’m George.”

“That’s Ranboo! My friend!” Tommy said excitedly. Ranboo’s lamb-like ears flattened and he smiled nervously, displaying a mouthful of sharp teeth. George gave him a small wave.

“We had no idea you were even alive!” Tommy maneuvered himself out of George’s lap, kneeling him several times in the gut, and curled up on the cushion beside him with his chin resting on his knees. His eyes were wide with excitement. “The Eretians wouldn’t return my dad’s letters and refused to give straight answers to our messengers. The whole continent thinks you’re dead! I personally thought you’d been captured because King Eret definitely would have put your heads on sticks if—“

“That’s enough, Tommy. Don’t be gruesome.”

King Phil moved past Ranboo into the doorway, dressed in the Antarctic Empire’s lavish regalia. “Go see if your brothers need help with anything. I’d like a moment alone with King George.”

Tommy pouted. “But Dad, I—“

“That’s an order, Tommy.”

Tommy darted out the door, leaving a trail of little feathers in his wake, and disappeared with Ranboo at his side. “Please excuse the feathers,” said Phil with a slight flush. “A certain little prince is experiencing his first flight feather moult. He’s a bit hyperactive these days.”

“No worries,” George replied. He stood, somewhat shaky on his feet, and held out his hand. To his surprise, Phil moved closer and wrapped him in a tight hug. The material of his fluffy cape was soft against George’s cheek.

“I was so frightened that something awful had happened,” Phil whispered. “I’m very glad to see you safe.”

George felt his throat tighten, though he wasn't quite yet ready to admit why. "Thank you, Phil. I'm glad Dream knew to come here."

Phil pulled back, resting his hands on George's shoulder. "Ah, Dream. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

A jolt of anxiety ran up George's spine. "Is he okay?" He asked nervously.

"Yes, thankfully," Phil said. "But you're lucky that my guards recognized the danger he was in as quick as they did. Throwing someone with nether fever into a very cold climate all at once can be quite deadly. They must be acclimated to different temperatures gently."

George sat back on the couch and put his head in his hands. "I should have known. I'm sorry."

"You're young. No need to apologize."

"So will Dream be okay?"

Phil nodded, his silvery crown glinting in the sunlight streaming in from the massive windows.

"Of course he will. His capillaries burst, but the worst that will do is leave him with some harmless spider veins on his hands and face. That shoulder wound will take him out of commission for a week or two, though. Blaze shrapnel can be quite damaging to muscle tissue. I'll assign you another bodyguard while he heals."

The heavy weight that had settled on George's shoulders lightened, and George took what felt like his first unencumbered breath of air in days. *Dream is going to be okay. I didn't kill him.* "That's fine. I'm glad he's okay."

Phil crossed the room and strode to one of the windows, staring out for a moment before speaking again. "Is this your first invasion?"

George sighed. "Yeah."

"Well, welcome to the world of being a king. I'm actually surprised the Eretians waited this long to try and take over. They're quite aggressive."

"Yeah, the knife to the side I got made *that* quite clear." George paused, seeing Phil's face twist in concern. "I got it healed. Don't worry about it."

Phil raised an eyebrow. "You've sure had a rough couple days."

"I don't even want to talk about it."

"Then I'll leave you to rest. I have rooms for you up on the second floor. You may know some of the—"

"Can I see Dream?"

Phil paused. "What?"

"Am I allowed to see Dream yet?" George repeated quietly. "I need to see that he's okay with my own eyes."

Phil gave him a warm smile and extended his arm for George to take his hand. "Sure. Then I'll get you settled in your room."

A particularly painful ball of grief bubbled in George's chest as Phil walked him down the palace's glimmering halls with one wing pressed against George's back. *Your fatherly tenderness usually annoys me*, George thought. *But now that everything's gone to shit, I could really use a dad right now.*

They reached a pair of white double-doors. Phil held George back as he went to open them. "Let me go in first."

George breathed a sigh of anxiety out his nose. "Alright. I'll be here."

Phil disappeared into the dimly-lit room, leaving the door an inch or two ajar. George leaned in to listen, unable to stave off his curiosity, but the voices that drifted from the crack in the door were too hushed to understand. The room smelt of herbs and sterility and the light tang of blood.

Prince Technoblade was the one to open the door and let him in. George tried to ignore the dark droplets speckled on the ends of his sleeves. "You have medic training?" George said quietly.

Techno shrugged. "A little. I like to help out."

Dream lay on a small cotton-sheeted cot beneath a shuttered window, motionless except for the rhythmic rising and falling of his chest. His injured shoulder was propped up by pillows and wrapped in thick bandages that circled around his chest and neck. A damp cloth lay over his face, masking all features except for his lips.

"He's on several painkillers," said Techno in a low murmur. "So keep your voice down. He'll be sensitive to light and noise for a while."

George nodded silently. Techno glided across the room, surprisingly light on his feet for such a tall man, and placed several empty potion bottles back into a cupboard before slipping out a door at the other end of the room. They were alone.

"Who's there?"

George looked down. Dream's eyelashes were fluttering beneath the cloth. "The hell's on my face?" He muttered blearily.

"A cloth," George replied. "I told them you wanted privacy."

"Who's in here with you?"

"Nobody. It's just us."

Dream sighed quietly. "Take... take it off. It's hurting my eyes."

With gentle hands, George peeled back the damp fabric and set it aside, allowing Dream to mumble in discomfort as his eyes adjusted to being open. There were splotches of red in the whites of his eyes where the capillaries had burst. Purple spider veins crawled up his cheeks and up the side of his nose, stopped only by the gashes of white scar tissue that made up Dream's face wounds. Yet, in some strange way, Dream looked better than he had in days. There was colour in his mottled skin, brightness in his eyes, almost as if the spirit of Dream himself had returned to his battered body in full force.

"How do you feel?" George chuckled.

"Swaddled," Dream replied. "Oh, and like somebody just let a thousand horses kick me in the face."

Overall, kind of shit.”

“You’re sure looking a little rougher than usual.” George brushed the bandage along Dream’s brow bone with a light finger, making him wince. “King Phil says I’ll be getting a new bodyguard while you’re healing.”

Dream scowled. “Bullshit. I’ll be fine in like, two days.”

“You look like you’ve been eaten and then shat out by a hoglin.”

“Don’t make me laugh!” Dream grabbed his chest, groaning. “It hurts.”

George pulled a nearby chair up to Dream’s bed and sat in it, pulling his knee up to rest his chin. “That’s why you’re going to be taking a break. I can’t risk you dying again.”

Dream’s face hardened into a solemn frown. “It’s not your job to worry about me. I have to protect you.”

“Then do as I say and rest.”

“So what, I just have to sit here and lay around all day?”

George fought back the urge to groan. “Yes. That’s kind of the point of resting.”

Dream curled his lip, pulling on the corner of his mouth puckered by a scar. “I’m going to go crazy in here. I hope you know that. So you can blame yourself when I inevitably go apeshit and punch someone.”

George sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. *There’s the Dream I know. Half-dead but still petulant and stubborn as an ox.* “If I hear that you’ve punched anyone, I’ll fire you on the spot.”

“You can’t do that!” Dream said angrily.

“Keep your fists to yourself and you won’t have to worry about what I can and cannot do!” George replied. “I’ll be sure to visit you and keep you from being too bored. In exchange, you will listen to the medics and not act like a uncivilized beast. Deal?”

“I’d cross my arms if one of them didn’t hurt like a bitch right now.” Dream blew an exasperated huff of air through his nose. “Fine. But get on my case about complaining and you’ll be the one I punch.”

An idea popped into George’s head. “I could teach you to read!”

Dream did his best to raise an eyebrow, which was difficult with the bandage that sat on his brow bone. “Now?”

“Why not?” George exclaimed. “You said you wanted to learn to read. It’ll keep you busy, too!”

“Are... Are you serious?” Dream said.

George nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! I think it could be fun. Not like we’ve got much else to do until we state a coup or the Eretians open themselves up to negotiations.”

Dream stared at the ceiling, pulling at a lock of his hair as he thought. “Fine,” he said. “But don’t be a dick about it if I don’t learn quickly.”

“Deal.” George smiled.

The door behind them burst open and slammed into the nearby walls. Dream threw his uninjured hand over his face instinctively.

Two figures stood in the doorway, panting. “Guys!”

Dream let his hand fall. “ *Sapnap?* ”

George’s heart stopped for a moment. “ *Quackity?* ”

Their voices joined into a panicked unison: “What the hell are you doing here?”

Chapter End Notes

two unfinished WIPs and all my pea brain wants to write is a MCYT hunger games au
god damn it

I hope y’all liked this chapter! Seeing everyone so happy abt corpse’s cameo made me really happy. I’ve been a fan of him since his horror narration days and seeing him succeed makes me happy to no end!

praise bingus

-Ophelia

Cool Kids

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Are you sure we should be doing this?”

Tommy poked his head into the darkened infirmary. “It’s fine,” he whispered back. “We’re just going to look at them.”

Ranboo frowned, gnawing at his lip. “What if... what if *he* wakes up?”

“He won’t if we’re sneaky!”

“Why do you even *want* to look at them?” Ranboo shrunk into himself as Tommy opened the infirmary door with a light squeak and slipped inside with his wings folded tightly against his body. “We’ve already seen them! Remember when one nearly sliced my face in half? I sure do!”

“If Dream is going to be staying in my castle,” Tommy said, “Then I’m going to go see his super-cool murder axes at least once. This could be our only chance!”

The early rays of the sunrise had warmed the tiled floor beneath Tommy’s feet, casting the paleness of the infirmary in different shades of orange and yellow. Ranboo remained pressed to the wall as Tommy ventured deeper into the room, mouth pulled into a tight, nervous line. “Your dad will be furious if he finds out.”

Tommy turned to his friend and pressed a finger to his lips. “Don’t be so loud!”

Ranboo’s ears flattened against his mis-matched hair. “Just saying,” he muttered.

“Go back up to bed if you’re so worried, then!”

“But I wanna see the axes too!”

“Then stop being a little bitch and come here!”

All the infirmary beds Tommy could see were empty and neatly-made. Had Dream already been moved to his room on the second floor? *That* would surely throw a wrench into Tommy’s brilliant plans. Sneaking into a royal bedroom was a whole different level of dangerous.

“Look under the beds,” Tommy said. “I bet that’s where he’s hiding them.”

Ranboo teleported in front of him, eyes the size of dinner plates. He jabbed an inky finger in the direction of one of the beds in the corner, hidden by white curtains.

Oh, this is going to be good.

Tommy pushed Ranboo forward. “Open them.”

“What?” Ranboo whispered shrilly. “You do it! This was your idea!”

“I’m telling *you* to do it!”

“I don’t want to do it!”

“I don’t care!”

Ranboo teleported behind him, wringing his hands together. “Absolutely not. You do it!”

“Pussy.” Tommy fluffed his wings in Ranboo’s face, making him squeak in surprise. “Watch this.”

He reached for the cotton curtain, only for it to be yanked out of his hands. Dream’s porcelain mask leaned in close until Tommy’s nose was nearly touching it.

“You’re not allowed to be in here.”

Those who knew Tommy well knew there were three things about him that were crucial to know if you were to be in his presence. They went as such:

One: Tommy’s favourite food was a sour-berry tart, but only the kind with the frosting on top.

Two: Tommy was incredibly awesome and all women loved him.

Three: Tommy really, *really* hated being startled.

Dream had obviously not been briefed on rule three.

Tommy’s fist landed straight between Dream’s beady eyes, knocking him backwards. He fell against his bed, shouting in pain. Tommy took a running start to escape only to have his legs kicked out from under him, sending him crashing to the ground. Dream grabbed Tommy’s ankle with an inhumanly-strong hand and yanked him across the floor until he was laying on the ground before Dream’s knees, staring up at that unnerving mask he’d already begun to hate. Ranboo, in the chaos, simply pressed himself back up against the wall and buried his face into his hands.

“You dick!” Tommy shrieked. “That hurt!”

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Said Dream angrily. “Trying to spy on me or something? You little creep!”

Tommy kicked at Dream’s legs, sending his moulting feathers scattering everywhere as his wings flapped erratically. “Let me go, dickhead!”

“Not until you tell me what the hell you were doing slinking around my infirmary room at five in the morning!”

“I wasn’t—” Tommy freed his ankle from Dream’s grip and skittered backwards— “I wasn’t *doing* anything. This is my palace. I live here. I can go where I want.”

Dream’s hand clenched and unclenched several times. “Were you trying to see my face? Is that what this is about?”

Tommy felt the thorns of anxiety begin climbing up his throat. Dream looked a lot bigger than he remembered. “No!” He said, keeping his voice steady. “We wanted to see your axes!”

“Bullshit! I should get King Phil down in here to beat *both* of your sorry asses.” Dream jabbed a finger at Ranboo, who flattened himself further against the wall with tear-filled eyes. “You two were trying to see my face. I know you were.”

“We weren’t! I promise!” Ranboo squeaked. “Just the axes!”

Hearing the wobble in Ranboo’s voice, Dream’s angry posture softened. He pressed his fingers to

his mask as if pinching the bridge of his nose. “I— my gods,” he said under his breath. With an exhausted groan, Dream maneuvered himself back into his bed and stuffed a pillow beneath his injured arm. Techno hadn’t been kidding when he’d said they’d used two whole rolls of bandages to wrap up Dream’s blaze wound. The dark splotches beneath the bandages covered an area bigger than Tommy’s whole hand. “You two idiots are lucky that the painkillers Prince Technoblade gave me have me walking on clouds,” Dream said. “My axes are under my bed. You can *look* . No touching.”

Tommy brightened immediately. “You won’t tell my dad?”

“I’m feeling nice today, plus the last thing I want King George finding out is that I made a child cry on my first morning here.”

Ranboo wiped at a tear dribbling down his chin, chuckling lightly. “I get startled easily.”

Tommy dropped to his knees and pulled out one of Dream’s axes from where they sat neatly-folded in white sheets. “Aether above,” he said in awe, “These things are awesome!”

He ran his fingers along the dark, glimmering surface of the axe, ignoring Dream’s light squawk of indignation. Ranboo appeared at his side, mouth wide open. “Netherite!” He cried.

Netherite was the coolest ore on the planet, no doubt about it. Forged out of centuries of pressure and nether heat, it was blast-proof, fire-proof, and practically indestructible in most other ways. Tommy grabbed the engraved spruce handle, felt the enchantment thrum beneath his fingers, and couldn’t stop himself from screaming, “This is so fucking cool!”

Dream snorted. “It’s full netherite too, not plated. There isn’t a single crumb of diamond in those things.”

The door behind them opened, bringing in a gust of brisk morning air that made Tommy’s wings bristle. “What’s going on here?” Said a familiar voice, groggy with sleepiness. “I heard screaming.”

Dream straightened. “Your Highness,” he said. “I had some surprise visitors. They wanted to see my axes.”

Tommy turned to see George leaning on the door-frame, dressed in a pair of Techno’s old pyjamas. He smoothed down a patch of his ruffled hair and raised an eyebrow. “At five in the morning?”

“Like I said—“ Tommy felt the heat of Dream’s glare on his back— “They were surprise visitors.”

“Hm.” George pursed his lips. “Well, you should get back to bed. You shouldn’t even be sitting up right now.”

Tommy grabbed Ranboo’s hand, making him jump. “Well,” he exclaimed. “Thanks for letting us see your axes! We’ll be off now!”

George’s face twisted into a frown as they blew by him, giggling like children, but Tommy could have sworn he saw George wink as he passed. Down the hallways they ran, past the couple cooks and maids that had begun their daily duties, and into Tommy’s cluttered bedroom. “We have to write to Tubbo!” Tommy said, pulling out a quill and piece of paper from his desk. “He’ll be so jealous!”

Passing the quill and paper to Ranboo, Tommy flung himself onto his unmade bed and brushed some of his moulting feathers off his sheets. Moulting was fun, knowing more of his flight feathers

would soon come in, but Aether above, was it ever messy!

“What do I say?” Ranboo kicked a couple scattered books away from the floor by Tommy’s bed and stretched out with one hand under his chin. “Dear Tubbo...”

“Uh—“ Tommy leaned his head over the side of his bed and watched Ranboo write out his words in small, neat letters— “Life is awesome right now. Dream and George are living with us and Ranboo and I got to see Dream’s axes. They were very poggers and—“

Ranboo looked up at him with a tilted head. “What does poggers mean?”

“It’s part of our secret language,” Tommy replied smoothly. “It means ‘super awesome’. You can use it now too if you want because you’re our friend.”

Ranboo grinned. “Poggers. I like that.”

“Don’t forget to mention that I punched Dream in the face.” Tommy held back a giggle. “That was so fun.”

Ranboo put the quill down and read back the sentence he’d wrote. “‘ *I punched Dream in the face today and didn’t even get in trouble for it. It was awesome.*’ Does that work?”

“Perfect. He’s going to be so jealous.”

Jealous Tubbo was always fun to deal with. Perhaps he’d stomp all the way over to Tommy’s kingdom just to get the chance to punch Dream himself, just like he’d done when Tommy had told him that he’d managed to win five ring-toss games in a row. Now *that* would be something Tommy would want to see.

“Alright,” Ranboo folded the letter in half and passed it to Tommy. “Think your dad is up yet?”

Tommy stood, wings outstretched, and tapped Ranboo on the top of his head with his foot. “Of course he is! I don’t think he ever sleeps. Let’s go see him.”

Something was off about Tommy’s father as they burst through the doors of his office. Tommy noticed the difference immediately. Phil wasn’t sat by the fire as he usually was at that time of the morning, nor was he bent over his desk scribbling king stuff Tommy didn’t understand into miles of parchment. That morning, he stood in the middle of the room, holding several letters in his hands. A wide-eyed mailman stood beside him, mouth tightened into a small frown.

“Tommy,” Phil said immediately. “Not now.”

The gravity in his tone made Tommy freeze. His father took his work seriously, but he always made sure to do it with a smile. When they’d gotten the news that the SMP kingdom had been invaded and that George and Dream were missing, Phil had sat him down by the fireplace and held him as he cried, explaining how he’d help make the situation right. Not once had he let his own worry or unhappiness show.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Dad, I—“ Tommy held up the letter. “I just wanted to give you this. It’s to Tubbo.”

Phil’s jaw moved as if he were biting his tongue behind his lips. He muttered a curse. “Leave the letters with me,” he told the squirrely mailman. “Return to duties as normal. You will be updated on any changes promptly.”

The mailman nodded and left in a hurry, giving Tommy the smallest of bows as he bustled by. "There's trouble with the mail," said Phil. "Manburg is refusing all our letters at the portal."

Tommy passed a nervous glance to Ranboo, whose eyes had taken on the familiar sheen of fear. "What? Why?"

"That's what we don't know." Phil walked back to his chair, tossing the pile of returned letters back onto his desk. "It's nothing for you two to worry about, though."

"But what about Tubbo?" Tommy exclaimed. "Is he in danger?"

"Tubbo will be fine, my child." Phil brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. "Go get your brother for me."

"You only call me that when you don't want to tell me something."

Something glinted in his father's eyes. Tommy felt the bottom of his stomach fall away, sending all of his organs and the air in his lungs tumbling down a massive pit of dread.

"I don't have anything more to tell you," Phil repeated slowly. "Go get Techno for me."

Ranboo grabbed Tommy's wrist. His hand was shaking.

"Is Tubbo safe, Dad?"

Phil blew out a long breath through his nose. Tommy felt the silence grip his throat like the tendrils of a monster.

"Come and sit down."

~

Given the week George had had, finding out Sapnap and Quackity had made it to the Antarctic Empire a mere day before them wasn't as strange as it would have once been.

According to a very rapidly-spoken and long-winded story told by Quackity, the inhabitants of the castle had scattered soon after George and Dream had escaped into the woods. Sapnap and Quackity had met by chance on their way to the portal, and had thankfully been able to travel through before the Eretians seized control and closed it. They were then recognized by some of Sapnap's old knight buddies who were working for the Antarctic Empire, who then allowed them to bypass the busier highways and take refuge in the castle.

"It was the worst two days of my life," Quackity had said, hugging George so tightly it had been nearly impossible to breathe. "Knights are so fucking annoying."

(Dream and Sapnap, in response, had raised simultaneous middle fingers. It was much funnier than George would ever admit.)

"Okay, I'm only marginally more accepting of this situation now that I know Sapnap is your new bodyguard until I'm better," Dream said, popping the rest of a breakfast ball in his mouth. "He's still not as good as me, but I'll accept it because he's my best friend."

George rolled his eyes. "I'm happy as long as that means you'll take recovery seriously."

"I am taking recovery seriously!" Dream nabbed another breakfast ball off the plate on George's lap and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. "I'm eating these disgusting breakfast balls and

laying down. I'm a model patient right now."

I think I'll get nauseous if I roll my eyes another time, George thought to himself. Placing the book he held in the crook of his armpit, George broke one of the crimson breakfast balls Wilbur had brought them in half and popped a piece in his mouth. It was sour, tasting of oats and dried berries, with a grainy texture that left George's tongue tingling. "They are not disgusting. Don't be rude."

Dream gave him a grimace that wrinkled the scar tissue over his nose. "Fine. They're—" his voice took on a faux-polite inflection— "Not my taste. I'd prefer some good bread and butter."

"Later. We have other things to focus on." George pulled the book from under his arm and laid it on Dream's lap. "Can you read the title at all?"

Dream scanned the small, leather-bound book with narrowed eyes. "I really only know the letters that make up my name, so not really."

"It's called 'The Village That Went Mad'," said George. "One of my personal favourites from when I was younger."

Dream cocked his head. "Never heard of it."

"It's a murder mystery. People in this little isolated town start to get murdered overnight, so the villagers come together and try to figure out who it is. It's super interesting! It's not too difficult to read, either, since it's a kids' book. I think you'll like it."

"Hm." Dream didn't look entirely convinced. "We'll see. Read me the first couple pages."

George sat the book between them as he read, trailing a finger under the words. He watched Dream's face out of the corner of his eye, but Dream's expression remained tense and focused as he tried to follow along. "Fucking hell," he murmured. "This looks impossible."

"It's not as hard as you think." George pointed to one of the names — Helga. "Recognize any of these letters?"

"The 'e' and the 'a'," Dream replied. "But they're in a different order, so I don't know what sound they make."

"Helga." George tapped the word with his finger. "Hell-gah. H-E-L-G-A."

Dream let out a nervous laugh. "I have never seen any of the other letters before, if I'm being honest."

"Really?" George said. "How familiar are you with the alphabet?"

"The what?"

Oh, this is going to be fun.

The door to the infirmary opened abruptly. Dream scrambled for his mask, but froze. "Your Highness!"

"Have you seen Tommy?" Phil rushed in and gave the room a quick scan. His neatly-braided hair was tousled, his mouth pinched into a tight line.

George shook his head. "He's missing?"

“He—“ Phil rubbed at his temple— “I told him some bad news about Manburg and he ran off. You haven’t seen him?”

“What’s wrong with Manburg?” Dream hurriedly buckled up his mask and tensed as if ready to rise. “Do you need my help?”

“No, rest, please,” Phil said. “I’ll explain it all later. I just need to find Tommy.”

“No need!” Came a voice from the hallway. “I’ve got him here.”

Phil whirled to the side and his face flooded with relief. “Tommy!” He cried, kneeling with his arms outstretched. Tommy’s figure flew into them, crying hysterically. “Where did you find him?”

Prince Wilbur’s head popped into the doorway and gave George and Dream a quick, polite wave. “On his way to the portal.”

Tommy jabbed his finger in his brother’s direction, snot bubbling on his upper lip. “You said you weren’t going to tell!”

“Kids, I—“ Phil rose to his feet, holding Tommy’s lanky figure on his hip. “Let’s not do this here. Upstairs, now.”

“It’s really alright, Phil,” George cut in quickly. “What’s happened to Manburg?”

Tommy burst into another bout of loud sobbing. Phil gave a defeated sigh. “Nothing’s happened. Not definitively.”

“Tubbo’s in trouble!” Tommy wailed, beating his fists against his father’s shoulder. “You said he was! You said he wasn’t safe!”

“I said I had my *suspicions* , Tommy,” Phil replied. “We have no proof that Manburg is in any danger.”

“Suspicions?” George and Dream shared a nervous glance. “You think they’ve been invaded?”

Phil passed the hysterical Tommy to Wilbur and murmured something in his ear. Nodding, the young prince disappeared with his brother latched onto his side, sniffing into his wings. Once away from his sons’ watchful eyes, Phil visibly deflated. “I apologize for interrupting your morning,” he said, tucking a stray lock of hair behind his ear. “Tommy can be... unpredictable when he’s upset. I haven’t yet figured out how to handle him when he flies off the handle.”

“Never apologize for your sons, Phil.” George motioned for him to sit on the bed next to them, which Phil did with a light chuckle. “Tommy’s young and afraid. I don’t blame him for being scared for his friend.”

Phil let out a soft groan, leaning over to put his head in his hands. “I shouldn’t have even told him anything. It was a simple mail scare! Certainly not something to go and burden a boy who’s barely grown into his flight feathers with. My parenting skills worry me sometimes.”

He chuckled softly. “And to think, your father used to tell me that I babied my boys.”

“A mail scare?” George raised an eyebrow. “I’ll need you to elaborate on that.”

“Our letters are being refused. That’s an early sign that something may be amiss at the portals. Now, the Eretians aren’t usually ones to attack twice at once, but—“

“It couldn’t be the Eretians!” George cut in. “They just invaded us a couple nights ago!”

Phil grimaced. “That means almost nothing. The Eretians have a massive army. It’d be quite easy to split it over the two counties.”

Dream leaned back against the metal bed frame, making it squeak. “Fucking hell, man. These dudes are maniacs.”

“I dealt with King Eret’s father for several decades.” Phil’s eyes narrowed. “You haven’t seen their kind of crazy yet.”

“They tried to *murder* George!”

“Like father, like child. I was once gifted a poison dart to the throat on one of my birthdays.”

Dream shuddered. “Brutal.”

“So,” George said. “What now?”

Phil stood, brushing the bits of dirt from Tommy’s shoes off his long robes. “We lie in wait until we’re needed. There’s nothing I can do until King Schlatt calls upon me to help.”

“Keep me updated.” George straightened his shoulders. “I want to be of as much service as I can.”

Phil gave him a warm smile that wrinkled the lines in the corners of his eyes. “As you wish, King George.”

His eyes focused on something behind George, and with a poorly-hidden smile, he said, “Your first order of duty is to tell your knight to stop scrounging for breakfast balls beneath his bed before he rips a stitch.”

George forced a smile as Phil left, listening to his laughter echo all the way down the hall.

If Dream wasn’t the only thing keeping me alive, I think I would have killed him already.

Chapter End Notes

Ranboo is very quickly becoming my favourite SMP character and I have no qualms with that go white boy go!!!!

c!Dream is making it harder and harder to write him as a cute simp knight bc all I wanna do is play ping pong with his stupid little head

what do you guys think is gonna happen? I want to know what you guys are expecting

-Ophelia

Written Words

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A week passed in the gentle monotony Dream had come to associate with life in the Antarctic Empire. He was, as Sapnap had once called him, a creature of habit, so as the days rolled by without news from their kingdom or the kingdom of Manburg, Dream found himself settling into a new yet manageable routine. Prince Technoblade, who'd unofficially deemed himself Dream's head nurse, would wake him at the crack of dawn to give him painkillers and re-set his bandages. Nether wounds infected easily, so he was meticulous with his work and grew frustrated if the bandages had so much as shifted overnight. It was somewhat odd to see his old rival playing nurse, but endearing nonetheless. It at least gave Dream many opportunities to screw with him if he ever got too bored.

George would eventually saunter down in the late morning, carrying a cup of black tea in one hand and his book in the other. The rest of the morning would be spent — at least, in Dream's opinion — in utter and total agony as George tried his damned hardest to teach him to read and write. In concept, it didn't seem that hard, but whoever had invented English as a language had probably been a miserable sod who wanted to fuck everyone up the ass for generations to come. It was so difficult and so boring that it was *painful*.

George placed a quill before him. "Write it out for me again."

"Again?" Dream balked. "I've done it three times!"

"And you've made mistakes every time! I want to see how much you're taking in."

Dream grabbed the quill and set his jaw. *My name is Dream and I am a knight. My name is Dream and I am a knight.*

George's dark eyes watched him as he wrote. "Don't stare," Dream mumbled. "You're making me nervous."

"Well, you've done well so far," George replied. "Keep going."

The untidy letters on the page danced around in Dream's mind. *Knight. Knight. K-N-I...*

"I can't remember. I always get stuck on fucking 'knight'. Aether Almighty." Dream rubbed at his eyes with an ink-stained hand. "I'm done for today."

George stuck out his lip. "Come on, you can do this. K-N-I..."

Dream slammed the quill onto the table with more force than he'd wanted. "I said I'm done."

He didn't like the way George's face creased as he frowned. There was pity in his eyes. Dream *hated* pity.

"Fine," George said. "Want me to read to you?"

Fucking finally. "Yes," Dream replied eagerly. "I have been waiting to hear more about Robin."

Reading by himself? Possibly one of the worst things Dream had ever done in his entire life.

However, having George read to him was the highlight of his day. Books were far more interesting than he'd ever imagined. They reminded him of the occasional theatre plays he'd have to attend with George, except they were ones he could play out in his own mind. And, as much as he hated to admit it, *The Village That Went Mad* was infuriatingly interesting for a book meant for twelve-year-olds.

"Do you think they're going to execute him?" George asked, grabbing the book from Dream's bedside table.

Dream swung his legs over the side of the bed and practically rolled onto it. His shoulder protested painfully. "Of course not! He's a kid! They have to know that he couldn't have shanked Cornelius like that. Plus, the Cat Boy definitely would have heard him!"

"They still executed the Cat Boy, though," George flipped open the book to where he'd dog-eared one of the aging pages. "So who's to say they won't do Robin in too?"

"Oh, I'll cry." Dream leaned his head back on the wall. "I have such a soft spot for kids."

George laughed aloud, unconvinced. "You've gotten into at least two physical fights with Prince Tommy in the last week and a bit. Call that a soft spot?"

"My soft spot for Prince Tommy consists of not throttling him and that's it."

A pang of guilt shot through Dream's chest, killing the laugh in his throat. They'd barely seen the young prince since his outburst a week before. From what Technoblade would tell, he remained convinced that Prince Tubbo was in danger, even as Manburg began accepting and sending letters again. After a second attempt to run away only two days earlier, he'd been grounded and mostly kept to his room under his brothers' supervision. "You know, I think us getting invaded traumatized that poor kid. Now he's paranoid."

"He'll be fine," George said with a light sigh. "Manburg's accepting letters again. They've got King Schlatt's signature on them and everything. Kids are just odd sometimes."

"Have you heard directly from King Schlatt or Prince Tubbo?" Dream asked. "Are there, like, plans for another meeting?"

"No. There really is no reason to."

"No reason? Your kingdom was invaded! The Eretians have shut down all the portals and banned anyone from coming or going!"

George folded the book in his lap and gave Dream a stern glare. "Phil has sent letters to the Eretians warning them of the consequences if they don't open themselves up to negotiations. That's all we can do for now."

"Load of bullshit is what it all is," Dream mumbled. "You should be rallying the armies and sending them in tonight. *That* would get those little bastards out quick."

"And risk lives unnecessarily? Not a chance. Things can be done diplomatically sometimes, Dream. Not everything has to be violent."

Dream was glad his mask hid his eye roll. *'Diplomatically' is my new least favourite word.* "Just start reading before you annoy me any more."

"Don't be tart," George scoffed. "I could leave you hanging."

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Shut it. I’m trying to read.”

~

“Alright, your Highness! Time for your daily walk!”

George sighed. “Can you stop saying that like I’m a dog?”

Sapnap strode into George’s lounge with his thumbs in his pockets, trailing specks of mud from his boots. “No, because that wouldn’t be as fun,” he said with a grin. “Get your boots on. Phil’s instructed me to take you out at least once a day to keep your brain working.”

Alright, Phil. Your fatherly tenderness is back to being annoying. “I can go walking in my own time.” George turned back to his tea and his book. “Go take Dream out! He needs a bodyguard more than me right now. I’m quite happy here with my pirate adventure story.”

“He’s already coming! Said he knew you haven’t been out today either. I even asked Phil if I could bring Tommy, but he’s still feeling sick.”

“Dream put you up to this?” George flipped the book shut, shoving the end of the tablecloth in as a bookmark. “I swear, a week off from work and he’s gone certifiably insane.”

“Tell me about it. Dream’s never been able to stay in one place for more than twenty minutes his whole life. Being on bedrest is killing him.”

Sapnap fiddled with the end of his scarf as George slipped on a pair of knee-high leather boots and one of Prince Wilbur’s old fleece-lined coats. “It’s so weird, just having to sit here and relax while waiting for the Eretians to do something. I feel like we should be preparing for war.”

“It’s not as easy as that.” George wrapped a red scarf around his neck and felt it tickle his jaw. “Wars cost a lot, so we try to avoid them as much as we can. The Eretians may be happy to relinquish control of the kingdom if we give them a diamond mine or access to a forest for wood.”

Sapnap scoffed. “So you’re basically rewarding them for invading? Sounds like bullshit!”

“The Eretians have burnt all their bridges in terms of trading with any of the nearby countries. This is their only way of getting what they want.” George breezed past Sapnap and stepped into the hall, smiling at the gentle snow falling outside. “It’s much less lucrative than having good relationships with your fellow kings, make no mistake.”

“I still think King Eret deserves to have their shit rocked.” Sapnap said with a grumble.

“Can’t argue with that.”

Dream was waiting for them by the castle doors, bundled beneath one of Phil’s massive capes. He’d tucked some of his scarf into the straps of his mask to keep it in place. “Let’s go,” he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “This is the first time I’ve been allowed outside in a week and I have never been so excited to touch grass before.”

Sapnap laughed. “You look like a toddler in that cape. Are you *that* cold?”

“Prince Technoblade made me wear it!” Dream pouted. “He doesn’t want my bandages moving too much.”

“I think it’s adorable.” Sapnap said, flicking Dream’s mask as he passed. “You look like a comfy little blob.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

A blast of cold air hit George’s face as Sapnap swung open the doors, tickling his cheeks with snowflakes. The sky was a single, even sheet of grey above them, the air just cold enough to bite at his ears and the tip of his nose. The winters back in the SMP kingdom were wet and dreary, a bother more than anything. But this? This was a proper winter.

Dream let out a loud groan of relief. “I have never been so aroused by fresh air before.”

“Everything you say makes me hate you a little more. I hope you know that.” Sapnap broke into a run and sprinted into the blustery courtyard, crunching the powdery snow beneath his boots. He grabbed the branch of one of the nearby trees, pulled it back, then let it swing forward again, sending a hail of packed snow and icicles down on top of them. “Watch out!”

George managed to jump to the side and miss the brunt of the downpour, but Dream was not so lucky. “Sapnap!” He shrieked, shaking like a dog. “You got snow down my back!”

Sapnap leaned forward, cackling. “Is your dick still hard from all this nice fresh air?”

“Oh, you—” Dream sprinted forward, good arm outstretched, and only narrowly missed grabbing Sapnap’s arm as Sapnap sidestepped and kicked him in the back of the knees. Dream lost his balance and grabbed Sapnap’s sleeve as he fell, sending them both to the ground. Dream’s cape slipped off his shoulders and was kicked away by Sapnap’s flailing legs, leaving him only in a dark, woolen sweater under which George could see the outline of his thick bandages. “Having fun?” Dream taunted, pressing Sapnap’s face into the snow. “I have been stronger than you since we were fifteen, idiot!”

“Dream! You can’t be fighting!” George exclaimed. “You’ll screw up your bandages.”

“I don’t care!” Dream laughed. “I haven’t had this much fun in so long!”

Sapnap squirmed out from underneath Dream and darted to George’s side. “Protect me, your Highness!” He wailed in a childlike falsetto, falling to his knees with his hands bunched in the fabric of George’s coat. “I am under attack!”

Dream advanced on them slowly, packing a snowball in his hands. His smiling mask looked oddly terrifying. Sapnap jabbed a finger at him. “You wouldn’t fucking dare risk hitting your king! You wouldn’t!”

“Dream,” George warned. “You’re injured, you shouldn’t—”

The snowball hit him dead in the nose.

Sapnap scrambled away from the both of them, mouth agape in shock. “Oh— Dream,” he said quietly. “You are in deep shit now.”

George blinked a glob of half-melted snow from under his eye. There was snow in his nose, in his ears, down his shirt. Slowly, methodically, he wiped the handful of snow off his face and flicked it onto the ground. Dream’s shoulders curled in sheepishly.

“Sapnap,” George said. “Do your job, please.”

Sapnap smiled nervously. “Huh?”

“You are my bodyguard. He just attacked me. Do the math.”

“What? Uh—” Sapnap’s eyes lit up. “Oh, of course! C’mere, Dream!”

You know, maybe it’ll be worth having Technoblade give me a nice little scolding for letting Dream fool around. George watched Sapnap tackle Dream into a snowbank and shove snow down his mask with the feeling of immature satisfaction blooming in his chest. *Because gods, if I’d have known I got to see this, I would have gotten hit with a snowball sooner.*

He was ripped from his thoughts when Dream came careening towards him. “Come here!” He shrieked, laughing so hard he was wheezing. Dream picked him up under the armpits and the knees and held him sideways like a human shield. “Try me! Try me!” He yelled at Sapnap, who danced from side to side with two snowballs packed in his hands. “I have protection!”

“Put me down!” George tried to sound serious, but a smile forced its way onto his face as Dream hoisted him up to block Sapnap’s snowball as it came flying towards them. “I am your king! This is inappropriate!”

“If I hear you say that dumb fucking line one more time—” Dream swung him sideways as Sapnap threw another snowball— “I am chucking you into the nearest snowbank!”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Dream’s voice dropped to a challenging low. “Want to bet those odds?”

George squirmed to get free but Dream’s grip on his knees and around his chest was tight. *I am toeing a dangerous line here*, He thought with a rush of excitement. He caught Sapnap’s eye, who raised an eyebrow as if to say, ‘are you thinking what I’m thinking?’.

Un-kingly things should not be this much fun.

With a massive grunt, George wrenched himself forward, causing Dream to stumble and lose his balance. Sapnap appeared over Dream’s shoulder, faster than what seemed humanly possible, and shoved a chunk of snow down the back of Dream’s shirt with a triumphant cry.

“Fuck!” Dream’s back arched instinctively, but he still managed to catch George around the waist as he tried to squirm away. “Oh, you son of a bitch!”

In a single deft motion, Dream dragged George sideways and threw him with all his might, sending him crashing into a powdery snowbank. The icy burn of half-melted snow shot up the back of George’s neck and down his spine. A moment or so later, Sapnap fell down hard next to him, wheezing.

“Still got it!” Dream said triumphantly. “I am injured and yet still stronger than the both of you. Take that!”

He burst into a round of cackling laughter, dancing from foot to foot as Sapnap forced himself back to his feet. “You’re such an ass,” Sapnap said, though the grin on his face negated any sharpness his words might have had. He grabbed Dream’s scarf and yanked it off him, dragging his mask askew.

“Hey!” Dream laughed. His face was flushed from exertion, dotting his scarred face with patches of red. George had never seen him grinning so widely before, nor had he seen the way his nose

crinkled and his eyes scrunched closed as his laughter broke off into a sudden, high-pitched wheeze.

He was, to put it plainly, quite pretty. Something about that made George want to kick him in the ass.

“What are you staring at me for?” Dream asked.

George hadn’t realized he’d begun smiling. “I’m thinking about how much I’d like to have you executed right about now.”

“Oh,” Dream purred. “You wouldn’t know what to do without me.”

Another snowball landed between them. “Cut that shit out!” Ssnap said, his expression somewhere between amused and uncomfortable. “Phil’s coming.”

The shadow of a quickly-moving figure arced over them and landed on the other end of the courtyard with a stumble. “King George!” Phil’s voice was tight, almost aggressive. “You need to come inside immediately.”

“We were just playing,” Dream said nervously. “It was my idea to start brawling, not George’s—“

“That’s not why I’m here.” Phil cut Dream off with a sharp wave of his hand. He turned back to George, his usually calm features pale and puckered with worry. “I’m not able to carry you, so hurry as fast as you can. I’ll meet you in my office.”

His great wings unfurled and he was gone in a flurry of feathers. Heart thumping in his chest, George turned to Dream and tried to say something, only to find the words dead on his tongue. Ssnap grabbed them both by the wrists. “What are you two standing there for? Let’s go!”

George’s lungs were burning by the time they reached the looming doors of Phil’s office. Dream put a hand on his shoulder. “Want me to go in there with you?” He said.

George turned to where Ssnap stood a couple feet behind them. “Meet me in George’s room after,” Ssnap said, his words a silent reassurance. *Go on without me.*

George nodded and swallowed, his throat lined with ice. Dream grasped the ornate golden handle of one of the doors and, with a gentle squeeze on George’s shoulder, walked the two of them in.

“We were mistaken, George. So mistaken.” Phil stood before the unlit fireplace, holding a letter between his hands so tightly the paper was taut and near ripping. “I should have known. Tommy was warning me. He *knew*—“

“Knew what?” George said.

Without turning around, Phil thrust the letter in their direction. Dream darted to take it from his hands, and George saw him visibly stiffen as he read the words on the page. “A messenger bringing letters from Manburg brought me this,” Phil said. “He’d apparently saw someone — a child — shove it into his mule’s sac as he stopped to take a piss. The child had already run away by the time he got back.”

Dream passed the letter to George with a white-knuckled hand. It wasn’t a letter at all, merely a couple sentences scrawled on a piece of newspaper in messy ink.

MANBURG WAS INVADED

ASSASSINS AT EVERY PORTAL

I AM FREEZING TO DEATH PLEASE HELP

I AM THE PRINCE

“I am an idiot,” Phil said through his teeth. “I should have at least sent a patrol to Manburg to make sure everything was alright.”

“Tubbo,” George whispered. “Our first order of business is finding the prince. He’ll be dead in days if we don’t go out now.”

“I’m already preparing the knights.” Phil walked to one of the windows and stared out at the snow. “They’ll go out in disguise. If Tubbo’s letter is to be believed, then the portals are certainly being watched.”

“Sapnap and I will go out too,” Dream said. “He’s a better rider than anyone I know.”

Phil shook his head. “Out of the question. Both of you are too recognizable. At best, you’ll be followed. At worst? Shot down with a crossbow the moment you ride through the portal.”

Dream clenched his fist. “We’re on a time limit! Tubbo is dying as we speak! You can’t afford to keep us grounded here!”

In what seemed like a split second, Phil crossed the room and had Dream by the collar of his tunic. “*Do not raise your voice at me, young man!*” He bellowed. “*You are under my rule!*”

“Dad?”

Phil let go of Dream’s collar and Dream crumpled to his knees as if shocked by lightning. “Tommy,” Phil said, barely above a whisper. “What are you doing here?”

Tommy took a frightened step through the cracked-open door, wings pressed so tightly to his body they were nearly invisible. “Why are you yelling?”

“Go upstairs,” Phil ordered. “This is not for you to hear.”

Tommy glanced imploringly at George. “Is something wrong?”

“I will explain it to you later, my child.” There was a sheen of sweat on Phil’s forehead. “Please, go upstairs. I will come read to you when I’m done.”

“Okay,” Tommy whispered. There was redness blooming around his eyes, a tightness in his lips that moved with the bobbing of his throat. “Okay, Dad.”

Once Tommy had left, Phil moved to the door and poked his head into the hallway to assure that his son wasn’t still within earshot. He clicked the door closed and rested his head against it, sighing softly. “I’m sorry for yelling, Dream. That was cruel of me.”

Dream plucked at the collar of his shirt. “It’s alright,” he said with the faintest of wobble in his voice. “I’d have done the same.”

“I’ll never forgive myself if I let that poor child die out there, alone and afraid,” Phil said gravely. “He’s practically one of my own. I *love* him like one of my own. I just—“

His voice died sharply. Phil clapped a hand over his mouth, eyes pressed close. “I apologize,” he

said in a strangled mumble. “You all may leave. The knights will be leaving shortly. You will be kept up to speed.”

He straightened, inhaling deeply through his nose. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” his voice was firm, but the pain in his eyes could not be hidden. “I’m going to go read to Tommy.”

They walked back to George’s room in uneasy silence. George had a pit in his chest. *That child could be dead by nightfall. It’s been snowing for days straight.*

“George?”

George blinked. Dream had a hand on his arm. “We’ll find the prince. I promise.”

“We aren’t doing anything.” Something about those words made George’s tongue tingle with bitterness. “Let’s just hope the knights find him.”

“Yeah.” Dream let his hand drop off George’s arm. “Let’s hope.”

Sapnap, who’d seemingly been pacing, nearly jumped out of his skin as Dream pushed open the door to George’s darkened room. “You guys are back already?” He said.

George’s head felt like it was full of cotton. “Yeah, we—“

“Prince Tubbo’s missing,” Dream interjected. “Go down to the knights’ quarters and see what their plans are. I want to know.”

“What?” Sapnap exclaimed. “I thought Manburg was safe!”

“Prince Tubbo sent Phil a secret letter saying how he’s in danger. He’s out in the wilderness somewhere between here and Manburg.” Dream walked to George’s fireplace and knelt before it, striking a piece of flint and steel together aggressively. “He’ll be dead in forty-eight hours tops if we don’t find him soon.”

“Let’s go now, then!” Sapnap darted to the door and threw on his coat. “Phil’s got tons of horses!”

“You’re not allowed,” George said, collapsing on his bed. His covers were cool. “Phil said you two are too recognizable, and there are assassins at every portal. He’s sending in patrols in disguise.”

“Go see what the knights’ gameplans are before they leave,” Dream ordered. “We need to know what their plans are.”

There was a moment of silence between the two knights as if they were saying something to one another George could not hear. Sapnap’s face hardened. “Roger that. Be back soon.”

Throwing his coat back on the hanger, Sapnap darted out the door and disappeared. The door closed behind him with a gentle click. George closed his eyes, watching the gentle colours of the blooming fire dance behind his eyelids. He tried not to think of Prince Tubbo — where he was, how cold he was, how near to death he may be.

How he may already be dead.

Dream made a noise of discomfort in the back of his throat. George cracked open one heavy eye. “What’s the matter?”

“Ah,” Dream said with a low chuckle. “My shoulder’s just sore. Technoblade’s been so busy with Tommy that he gave me medicine to put on it every day so he didn’t have to. I kind of forgot to this

morning. It's hard to put it on myself."

"I bet chucking me into a snowbank didn't help with your healing, either." George murmured.

"I don't regret it," Dream replied. "It was the highlight of my day."

"Watching Sapnap shove snow down your neck was the highlight of mine."

The sound of their chuckles hung in the air as they fell back into a semi-comfortable silence.

"Where is your medicine?" George asked after a moment.

"Uh—" Dream paused to think— "My bedside table downstairs."

"Go get it. I'll help you put it on."

"No," Dream said. "You should nap for a bit. You're looking pale."

"Go." George pointed to the door. "King's orders."

"Fine," Dream mumbled, but his voice was tinged with softness. Once alone, George sat up in his bed and pulled his knees to his chest.

I need you now more than ever, Dad. Keep Tubbo alive, wherever he is. Protect him.

George's throat tightened slightly, as it always did when he thought of his father. *I have no idea what to do right now. Send me a solution, Dad. I'll do anything. I just want to find Tubbo safe and sound.*

He reminds me so much of me.

Dream slipped back in on light feet, breaking George from his thoughts. "I got it," he said.

"Good." George swung his legs off the bed. "Go sit down in front of the fireplace."

"I don't know what Technoblade put in this shit," Said Dream as he sat down in front of the flickering flames, "But it smells so good I could almost eat it."

George grabbed the small, round container from Dream's hand and gave it a sniff. It smelt of fruit and something sterile. "It's probably got a healing potion base. I bet it doesn't taste as good as it smells, though."

He reached for the collar of Dream's tunic to pull it down, only to be surprised as Dream pulled the entire thing off. "Once again, performative modesty isn't needed," he said, tugging at the bandages around his chest. "I don't want the salve on my tunic, either. It gets oily when it hits cotton."

"That's fine." George stared at the lines of muscle on Dream's arms as they flickered in the shadows. "Tell me if anything hurts."

With a gentle hand, he untucked the end of the bandage on Dream's bicep and began unwrapping it. He'd never gotten the chance to get a good look at Dream's wound, even when he'd pulled the shrapnel from the cuts, and seeing the constellation of raw scar tissue scattered over his arm and shoulder made his stomach twist. "I can't imagine how much this thing hurt," he murmured.

Dream shrugged, squirming slightly as George's hands passed over the crook of his neck. "The shock helped a lot. You were a comfort, too. Nothing is worse than being injured and alone."

“I was actually a comfort to you?” George said with a small smile. “If you’d have told me from a month ago that, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Me from a month ago wouldn’t have either.” Dream sighed as the rest of the bandage fell loose, rolling his sore shoulder with a light grunt. “Becoming friends with you wasn’t exactly part of my schedule.”

George unscrewed the cap of the salve and dipped two fingers in. The gel was cool on his skin, coloured a light pink and slightly glittery in the light of the fire. “Alright, I’ll start by your arm and go up to your shoulder. Sound good?”

Dream nodded silently. George pressed his hand to a pair of thin slash marks on Dream’s bicep, making him tense up and suck air through his teeth. “Keep going,” he said. “It just tingles a little.”

George began to move his fingers in small circles, stopping only to dip them in salve every minute or so. He became so focused on his work that he didn’t notice Dream’s other arm come up and slip his mask off until he murmured, “It’s hot in here.”

His eyes looked nearly black in the firelight, the mottled whites of his eyes somewhat eerie. George’s fingers pressed on a lump of taut muscle beneath a spatter of half-healed cuts, making Dream’s eyebrows furrow. “Ow.”

“You’re tense,” George said.

“I haven’t been able to stretch in a while,” Dream replied.

“More yoga for Mr. Dream, then.”

“Oh, shut it.”

Once Dream’s arm was done, George scooted closer and began on his chest. “I’m glad we’re friends,” he said after a moment. He wasn’t sure why he was feeling so bold, but there was a warmth in his chest that seemed to melt away at some of his inhibitions. Alone, in the dark, without his mask or armour, Dream did not look scary. He looked... familiar. “It’s nice having people to talk to.”

“Who knew mortal danger was such a good bonding activity?” Dream replied. He turned his head, watching George as he rubbed at a particularly jagged slash just below his collarbone. “We get along better than I thought.”

Despite being so muscular, there was something graceful about the lines of Dream’s arms and shoulders. *He could have been a fine dancer.* “Well, we didn’t really know each other until now,” George said. “I don’t think we’ve ever tried to get along before. I assumed you hated me from the beginning.”

“I never hated you.” Dream laid a hand on George’s knee. “Really. I— I didn’t. I promise.”

George smiled, which made the worry lines on Dream’s face soften. “Well, I never hated you either. At worst, you irritated and scared me a little.”

That made Dream snort. “I scared you? Bullshit!”

“It’s true!” George laughed. “You and Sapnap used to spar under my library window every single day and I was convinced that was your way of telling me you wanted to beat the shit out of me.”

“My gods!” Dream tipped his head back and cackled. “You make me sound like I was a maniac!”

“You were fucking scary! Imagine having a six-foot stony-faced fifteen year old standing outside your bedroom while you and your friend were chatting. You’d have been unnerved too!”

“Well, sorry for scaring you.” Dream wiped at an excess bit of salve with his thumb. “I hope you aren’t still scared by me.”

“Nah,” George said with a wave of his hand. “It’s been hard to be scared of you ever since I saw you tear up when Robin was executed.”

“That was fucking sad! He wasn’t even the killer!”

George wiped the rest of the salve on his pant leg and sat back on his heels. Dream, smiling gently, cocked his head to the side and stared at him.

He really is quite pretty.

George mirrored his pose. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing in particular,” Dream replied smoothly.

“I think—“ The warmth in George’s chest bloomed as if it were a fire being stoked — “I think you’re looking at me.”

“And if I was, George?”

I like the way he says my name.

“Then, uh—“

The door to his room swung open, flooding the room with light. Sapnap stepped in, only to freeze in his place. “Whoa!” He blurted.

“Sapnap!” Dream jumped to his feet with his tunic in hand, leaving his bandage abandoned on the floor. “Did you get any info?”

Sapnap blinked. “Uh—“ his eyes flickered between Dream and George. “Oh, yeah. I did. I did.”

“Tell us!” Dream shoved his tunic over his head. “Don’t just stand there!”

“Well, we know one thing for certain.”

George forced his thumping heart to slow. “And that is?”

Sapnap’s jaw set. “We have to find some way to sneak out and find Tubbo ourselves. If we don’t, then he’s dead meat.”

George’s blood went cold.

When I said I wanted a solution, Dad, this isn’t what I meant.

Was gonna post this on Wednesday for Maximum Clout but then I got impatient lmao

I've never written romance before so I hope the relationship is building to you guys' preference! I have definitely not learned the ways of heatwaves but god damn it I'm trying snskdjf

-Ophelia

Battle Plans

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The plan was simple.

Somehow, that made it scarier.

“The knights left an hour or two ago,” Sapnap said, bent over a half-eaten plate of fatty chicken wings. “That leaves the knights’ quarters open for us all night. Once the castle goes to sleep, you two meet me there.”

Dream, stood over by the window as if expecting to see Tubbo appear over the horizon, made a small noise of acknowledgment. “And they have sets of armour left over?”

“Yeah, tons.” Sapnap bit another mouthful of meat off the wing in his hand and wiped the grease off his chin with his sleeve. “Probably not the best stuff, but it seemed like decent leather and iron from what I saw. More than enough to block a stray or skeleton’s arrow.”

George picked at the coarse bread he was given and dipped a piece in the fatty grease on Sapnap’s plate. “What about an assassin’s?”

“That’s what I’m not sure of,” Sapnap said with a frown. “We’ll have to bring shields. We’ll risk bringing more attention to ourselves, but being caught without them could be lethal if we’re recognized.”

George sat back against the plush couch and let the fat-soaked bread melt on his tongue. “Dream will have to go without his mask, then.”

“I’ll handle it,” Dream replied stiffly. “You two have already seen my face before, and I doubt Tubbo will remember this at all when we manage to save him.”

George bit at the inside of his lip. *I wish I had that kind of blind confidence.*

Someone knocked at the door, causing the three of them to jump simultaneously. “Who is it?” Dream called.

“It’s Quackity!” Came a voice from the other side.

George’s heart leapt. “Come in!” He said immediately.

Quackity walked in, stretching his arms above his head. “Hello!” He said with a yawn. “Fancy seeing you all here.”

Sapnap kicked George’s foot beneath the table. *Shhhh*, he mouthed. George rolled his eyes. “Come sit,” he said, “We were just having dinner. Want some?”

Quackity grinned. “Gods, yes. I’m starving.”

He plopped down next to Sapnap and grabbed one of the wings, ignoring as Sapnap bristled uncomfortably. “Phil’s had me babysitting Tommy for the last couple days. I’ve barely had the chance to come out of his room!”

Dream crossed his arms. “How is he?”

“In the middle of a downright crisis,” Quackity said through a mouthful of food. “He figured out Manburg was invaded pretty quickly after Phil’s meeting with you guys. Kid’s been a mess all day.”

“Oh, Tommy,” George sighed. “I can’t imagine how he feels.”

“At least he’s out of the destructive phase of his breakdown.” Quackity sagged in his seat and rubbed at his eye with the palm of his hand. “I had to get Technoblade in there to help me. Thank the gods he can’t fully fly yet.”

“Tubbo will be found safe,” Dream said in a reassuring tone, “I promise that.”

“I mean, I trust the knights, but I’d be lying if I said the situation doesn’t look fucking abysmal right now. It’s been snowing for days.”

Quackity leaned back and stretched his legs out under the table, trapping one of George’s feet between two of his own and squeezing it gently. *I missed you, man*, the silent gesture said. *We have to catch up.*

Dream waved a hand dismissively, but tension hung heavy in the air around him. “He’ll be alright, I promise.”

“Your confidence astounds me, but I’m happy you’re feeling optimistic.” Quackity raised an eyebrow. “You should go comfort Tommy. He’d probably be happy to hold your axe or punch you in the face again.” A chuckle bubbled in his throat. “Yeah. He told me about that.”

“I’ll think about it.” The glare Dream gave to Quackity seemed to sear right through his mask. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have things to discuss.”

“What?” Quackity pointed his chicken wing in Dream’s direction. “It’s you two who are leaving! King George needs some breathing room from you two.”

Now it was Dream’s turn to bristle. “We’re busy here!”

“An hour with just us two won’t hurt,” George said. “I do need a bit of a stress break.”

“But—” Dream tipped his head back and groaned. “One hour. That’s it.”

“And I want you and Sapnap to go visit Tommy. Make him feel safe.”

“You’re pushing it.”

George snapped his fingers towards the door. “King’s orders! I’ll see you two back here in an hour. No earlier.”

Quackity kicked at George’s leg as the two grumbling knights left, holding back his laughter until the door had shut behind them. “Dude!” He gasped. “I am definitely on their hit list now. Did you see Sapnap’s face?”

Warmth filled George’s chest. “Come here, man,” he said. Without waiting for an answer, he stepped around the table between them and wrapped his arms around Quackity’s shoulders. “I missed you. You will not believe the day I’ve had.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come visit sooner,” Quackity said. “I’m serious when I say that I couldn’t

leave Tommy's room. That kid's having a serious breakdown."

George collapsed back onto the plush couch and allowed Quackity to sit next to him and dig back into the remaining wings. "I'm halfway there myself. I've got a bad feeling about all this, I tell you. The Eretians have something planned."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Quackity tapped George's nose with a chicken bone, making him curl his lip. "King Phil and the other princes seem to be on high alert too. I heard him and Prince Technoblade talking into the early hours of the morning while guarding Tommy's room."

"Gods," George moaned. "I feel like everything is crumbling around me. I don't know what I'll do if we can't get to Prince Tubbo in time. Dream won't admit how little of a chance we have at finding that kid safe and I'm pretty sure it'll kill Tommy if his friend dies."

He rested his head on Quackity's shoulder and sighed. "Dream and I are friends now, by the way."

Quackity's eyes widened. "Well, then. That's an unforeseen change."

"I know!" George laughed weakly, rubbing at the corner of his eye with a finger. "It's weird, but nice nonetheless. He's a pretty cool guy."

Quackity was silent. George turned his head to see his friend looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "What?" He said.

"You think he's cool?" Quackity said.

"Uh, yeah?"

"*Really* cool?"

George cocked his head. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

A smile spread across Quackity's face. "It's nothing. Want to hear about how Tommy punched Dream in the face?"

"Depends," George said. "How much will I want to beat Dream's ass after hearing it?"

"A decent amount."

"Awesome. Tell away."

~

"What the hell is up with you and the king?"

Dream started. "What?"

Sapnap fiddled with his headband, eyes trained ahead. "You two are close."

"And?"

"*And?* You two hated each other up until a week ago."

Dream shrugged. "We had some nice talks. Turns out we have more in common than we thought."

"Yeah." Sapnap's brows furrowed.

“What?” Dream said, irritation tingling along the back of his neck. “Why do you seem so skeptical?”

“I’m not!” Sapnap laughed. “I just don’t think you’re telling me the full truth right now.”

What? Dream froze in his tracks. “What the hell are you trying to say?”

Sapnap stopped a couple steps ahead of him, chuckling tensely. “Want me to be completely honest?”

Dream crossed his arms. “That’d be appreciated.”

“I think you’ve got a thing for him.”

Dream balked. “What? Are you kidding? Where the hell did you get *that* fucking idea?”

Sapnap pressed his fingertips into his eyes. “I walked in on him feeling you up while you were shirtless!”

“He was putting medicine on my arm!” Embarrassment exploded in flames up Dream’s neck and cheeks. “Don’t make it weird!”

“*I’m* making it weird? *Me?* You’ve been preening yourself like a god-damned bird for him the moment you two got here!” Sapnap exclaimed in frustration. “I have listened to you complain about this guy every night since we were kids, Dream! What the hell happened? Is it the invasion? The Tubbo situation? Why are you so weird all of a sudden?”

He jolted as if he’d been electrocuted. “Please don’t tell me you guys fucked in the woods or something. Dream, I *swear* —“

Dream clapped a hand over his friend’s mouth. He was glad his mask hid the redness creeping up his face. “What’s wrong with you?” He hissed. “He’s my fucking boss!”

Sapnap batted his hands away. “I know you, Dream! You’ve never gotten like this around someone before. Ever.”

Sometimes I could fucking kill him. “We’re friends now, okay?” Dream said. “That’s why I seem different. I don’t dislike him now. That’s it. That’s all. No fucking involved.”

Sapnap looked unconvinced. Dream rubbed at his temples. Why had George forced them to go babysit a traumatized child while he gossiped? “If you tell George anything about this, I’ll kill you. I swear.”

“Trust me, I’m not about to get involved in whatever the fuck is going on between you two,” Sapnap said. “Let’s just go talk to Tommy and then get this fucking plan on the move before I give myself stress ulcers.”

The tension between them remained so thick in the air as they approached Tommy’s room that Sapnap stopped Dream’s arm as he reached for the door. “If I really was wrong about you two,” he said, his voice gentle and somewhat embarrassed. “Then I’m sorry. I’m glad you two are friends. Don’t be an idiot and shut him out because I got the wrong idea.”

Dream felt his shoulders relax. “I won’t. I promise.”

Sapnap smiled, then rolled his shoulders back. “Cool. Time to play babysitter.”

Dream rapped on the door with a knuckle. There was silence for a moment, then a quiet, “Yes?” From the other side of the door.

“It’s Dream and Sapnap!” Dream said. “I was wondering if you’d like to see my axes again.”

“I brought my cool knives,” Sapnap piped up awkwardly.

Tommy took a moment to answer. Dream heard him shuffle around for a couple moments. “Fine. Come in.”

Quackity hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said Tommy had been through a destructive breakdown. His small yet ornate bookshelf had been emptied and lay overturned on the floor. Ripped-up books and pieces of parchment littered the floor of the cozy bedroom, crunching beneath their feet as they walked in. Tommy himself lay curled in a ball on top of his covers, rocking ever so slightly. He’d ripped up the curtains of his four-poster bed and scattered scraps of royal blue fabric everywhere.

“It looks like a hurricane’s been through this place,” Sapnap blurted. Dream kicked at his foot, but Tommy sighed and sat up, rubbing at his swollen eyes with his palms. There were bald spots on his wings. *Aether almighty*, Dream thought to himself. *This kid looks like a war prisoner.*

“What do you guys want?” Said Tommy weakly. “My dad said I’m not allowed to have visitors.”

Well, fuck. “King George wanted us to come visit you,” Dream replied, awkwardly stepping over the massacred remains of a golden throw pillow. “He thought you could use a little company.”

Tommy doubled over as if in pain and buried his face into his bed. “Have they found Tubbo yet?” He said into his blankets.

“Not yet.” Dream sat down by Tommy’s legs and placed a hand on his ankle. The child’s skin was cold. “But I’m sure they will.”

Without warning, Tommy threw himself upwards and launched himself into Dream’s arms, hiccuping. “I don’t want Tubbo to die!” He wailed, wrapping his skinny arms around Dream’s shoulders like a vice. “You need to find him!”

Dream glared at Sapnap imploringly, but his friend only shrugged and chuckled nervously. *Useless asshole*. “It’s up to the knights, kid.” Dream cringed at his own inability to sound comforting. Tommy’s wings wrapped around them both like a second set of arms, trembling so badly they shed feathers onto the bed. “I bet they’ll find him nice and safe.”

And if they don’t, we will.

Tommy tucked his head beneath Dream’s chin and wiped his dribbling nose on Dream’s sleeve. He was barely heavier than one of Dream’s axes. “I want you to go out. My dad’s being stupid.”

Dream and Sapnap shared a nervous glance. The absolute *last* thing they needed was to have Tommy on their trail. “We’re too recognizable, Tommy. It’s just not safe,” said Sapnap. “The knights are good at what they do!”

Tommy scowled. “The knights are a bunch of bitch-motherfuckers.”

Dream held back a snort. *Bad would have a heart attack if he met this kid.* “If your dad gives us permission, we’ll go out. If not, then we’re staying here.”

Tommy slammed his hand down into Dream's leg with surprising force. "I am a prince!" He shrieked, red-faced and shaking with rage. "I'm *ordering* you to go find Tubbo!"

"I listen to King George and your dad," Dream said stiffly. "They said no, so I can't do anything."

"You're all *useless*!" Tommy erupted into a writhing ball of flailing limbs and feathers. One of his fists collided with the side of Dream's mask, wrenching it across his face with enough force to make Dream's nose explode with pain. "You're all stupid! I hate you!"

Dream pushed Tommy off him and the boy clattered to the floor, screaming at the top of his lungs. With more agility than Dream would have ever expected, Tommy flipped over onto all fours and skittered up one of his bedposts. "Stupid!" He roared, wings outstretched and puffed up behind him.

"Fuck it," Sapnap said quickly. "I'm going to get Phil!"

Dream resisted the urge to reach for his axe as Tommy jumped down on top of him and began pummeling at his chest and face. "Don't fucking leave me!" He shrieked. When he managed to turn his head to the doorway, he found it empty. "Fuck you, man!"

"I hate you!" Tommy grabbed a handful of Dream's hair and yanked it as hard as he could. "You're killing Tubbo! You're a coward!"

There was something warm and metallic dribbling down onto Dream's lips. *If this fucker stains my mask by giving me a nosebleed*, he thought as he wrenched Tommy's arms to his sides, *Then I swear to all the gods above that I will murder him and not regret it for a second.*

Wilbur, uncharacteristically frightening in his billowing royal regalia, burst into the room with a snarl on his face. "Get off him!" He ordered. Tommy whipped his head around and spat at him, then kicked at Dream's chest until he was able to squirm free and clamber back up onto his bedpost. Sapnap poked his head in behind Wilbur and mouthed a single sentence: *What the fuck is going on?*

"Tommy." Wilbur's voice was firm, his arms outstretched as if ready to catch him. "You need to calm down."

Tommy pressed his head to his bedpost and screamed until he had no breath left. "Tubbo is dying! He's dying!"

"The knights are out right now looking for him," Wilbur said. "You're not helping anyone by being destructive."

Tommy kicked at him, snarling. "Tell Dream and Sapnap to go out and look for him. *NOW!*"

"They are too recognizable, Tommy! It's just not possible!"

"Argh!" Tommy did an awkward half-flip off his bedpost and collapsed into a ball, kicking at the empty air around him as if being attacked at all angles by invisible assassins. "I hate you all! You're killing my best friend!"

Dream winced as Tommy's ankle collided with one of the legs of his bed hard enough to make the whole room shake. *This kid's going to kill himself if he doesn't stop this soon.* He stood up, fingering the collar of his tunic nervously. Perhaps Tommy would listen to him, or perhaps he'd just be able to pin him to the ground so he wouldn't be able to kill himself—

A hand grabbed his arm. It was Wilbur, his face cool and neutral. He pulled Dream to Sapnap's side, gentle but firm, and nodded to the two of them slowly.

I've got this.

The presence of his brother seemed to wane Tommy's energy, and within a minute the child's growls and snarls had quieted into rather pitiful sobs. He tried to squirm away as Wilbur picked him up, but eventually his exhaustion overtook him and he went limp in his brother's arms. Wilbur waved Dream and Sapnap out of the room with a gentle swing of his wing. "I'm sorry you two had to see that," he said. "I can have my dad swing by your rooms this evening to apologize, if you'd like."

"We're good," Dream said nervously. His nose ached with the movement of his mouth and he *desperately* needed to take off his mask before the stench of his own blood made him puke.

"We're going to have an early night. Tell your dad to focus on Tommy for now."

Wilbur nodded sagely. Tommy began to paw at his brother's shoulder, trembling. "I want Dad," he whimpered. "I want Dad."

Wilbur pursed his lips. "I should go. If you two need anything, don't hesitate to find one of us. We're always here to help."

Dream managed to wait until the two princes had rounded the corner before leaning against the wall and ripping his mask off, sending half-coagulated blood spilling onto his tunic. Sapnap ran a hand through his hair, laughing incredulously. "The fuck just happened?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." Dream pinched the bridge of his stinging nose. "Let's just get back to George before I pass out."

"I thought Tommy was going to kill you!"

"He's lucky I didn't freak out and put an axe through his chest," Dream grumbled, swiping at a glob of blood that hung off his chin. How Phil had managed to not throw his youngest son out the nearest window yet was a downright mystery. "He came at me like a rabid fucking animal!"

"I was there! I saw!" Sapnap put a comforting hand on Dream's shoulder and helped him walk half-blindly back down the halls, peeking around the corners to make sure there were no wandering servants.

Dream rubbed at his temple. His mouth tasted of blood and given how much his ears were ringing, it would be a miracle if Tommy hadn't given him some sort of brain damage. "I need a nap."

Sapnap pursed his lips to keep from smiling. "Need King Georgie to kiss your boo-boos better too?"

Dream whacked at Sapnap's arm, making him whine. "Not now, asshole."

Sapnap harrumphed. "Well, Tommy obviously didn't knock a sense of humour into you."

"I fucking mean it."

"Alright, alright! Chill it, knight boy."

~

“Apparently Tommy got his ass kicked for the axe thing. Wilbur says his dad is super sensitive when it comes to making good impressions on guests.”

George chuckled into his tea. It was still too hot to drink, but he liked the way it warmed the tip of his nose when he sniffed it. “I should be the one worried right now! Dream knows better than to scare Tommy. If Phil wasn’t as nice as he was, we’d be out on our asses right now.”

“I think Phil’s finally met his match with that kid,” Quackity said. “He can throw a tantrum that would make the likes of Herobrine shit his pants! Technoblade calls him Hurricane T—“

The doors swung open, and in walked Sapnap and Dream, ruffled and bloody. A shocked cackle erupted from Quackity’s mouth. “What the fuck happened to you two?”

Dream, his face half-obscured by the hand he had pressed to his bloody nose, jabbed a finger in Quackity’s direction. “Don’t look at me!” He snapped, pushing past a rattled Sapnap into the small on-suite and slamming the door behind him. Sapnap chuckled humourlessly and gave the two of them a sheepish wave with a blood-speckled hand.

“What happened?” George asked. “It’s barely been ten minutes!”

“Tommy happened, your Highness!” Dream’s angry voice drifted from the bathroom. He gasped as though he were in pain. “Mother *fucking* —“ he cursed several times— “Tommy happened!”

Sapnap plopped down on one of the couch cushions and rubbed at his eyes. “Tommy was not happy to hear that we wouldn’t be going out to find Tubbo,” He said awkwardly. “I think you can guess what happened next.”

Quackity blanched, rising to his feet with his hands bunched in the fabric of his woolly tunic. “I should go, then. Phil will probably be wanting me back on babysitting duty.”

“Bring a fucking shield!” Dream yelled from the bathroom.

“Noted!” Quackity gave George a small smile. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

George sighed as he watched his friend bustle from the room in a hurry, bringing George’s sense of relaxation with him. *Leave it to Dream to ruin my hour of peace*, he thought irritably. “Explain to me exactly what happened,” he said to Sapnap, watching him shrug off the leather vest he kept his knives in and sit down on the couch with a tired groan. “If I’m going to need to write an apology letter to Phil because Dream traumatized an already-traumatized child, I’d like to know now rather than later.”

Sapnap waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing like that. Tommy had a tantrum and beat the shit out of Dream. End of story. We were two good little knights who did what their king said and now Dream has a broken nose to show for it.”

George stood instinctively. “His nose is broken?”

“No it’s not!” Dream cracked open the bathroom door and tried to wave George away as he pushed past him into the bathroom. “It’s just bruised! I’m fine!”

“Let me see!” George snapped. Dream turned away from him, blocking George’s view of his nose with his shoulders. “Dream! Stop being an ass!”

“Stop being overprotective!” Dream replied. “I’m fine!”

George grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him around to face him, ignoring Dream's attempt at keeping him distanced. Dream's nose didn't look crooked, thankfully, but there were two dark bruises blooming in the inner corners of his eyes and enough coagulated blood had dripped down his tunic to seep through the light material. "Lean over the sink and stop pinching your nose," George said, giving him a light spin. "I can't believe you two managed to get bloodied in ten minutes!"

"Don't snap at me like I did something wrong!" Dream spun around and gripped the edge of the marble counter until he was white-knuckled. "*You* told us to go visit him!"

"I'm not snapping at you! I'm trying to help!"

"I don't need help!"

George grabbed a hand cloth from one of the small drawers beside him and ran a corner under warm water. Dream's blood hit the basin of the sink in dark droplets, darkening the water swirling at the bottom. George reached a hand up to Dream's face, curling his fingers gently under his chin and pulling it to face him. "I can do this by myself, thank you," Dream mumbled, but he didn't move away as George brought the warm cloth up and began wiping at the blood beneath his nostrils. George moved down to his lips, then his chin, then to the long stripes that stretched down his neck, all the while Dream was tight-lipped and silent.

"You've got it all down your shirt," George said with a pucker of his lip. "Let me get you one of mine."

"I'm seriously fine." Dream made an attempt to swipe the cloth from George's hands. "I'm not taking one of your shirts."

"Why not? They're all Wilbur and Technoblade's old shirts anyways. It's not like I'm giving you my crown."

"I meant I can get it myself." Dream grabbed the bloody cloth from George's hands and tossed it into the sink. "I don't need to be babied."

George watched him leave, throat bobbing. The memories of that afternoon began to creep up the back of his mind in alarming detail. *What was that?* He hadn't had a chance to think about it since it had happened. *What happened between us? What happened to me ?*

He looked down into the sink, where the pinkish remnants of Dream's blood sat at the bottom of the basin. It was the same shade as the medicine he'd help put on Dream's arm. George remembered the smell, the tingy coolness of it on his fingertips.

How it had made Dream's skin sparkle in the firelight.

George rubbed at his eyes. *I need my fucking tea.*

Sapnap was back to being bent over his plate of wings when George re-emerged from the bathroom. Dream was nowhere to be seen. "Quackity ate my fucking wings!" Sapnap cried. "I was gone for ten minutes! How fast does this guy eat?"

George sat down across from him and grabbed his teacup. His tea was just hot enough to burn the tip of his tongue. "I'll send a servant to go make more," he said. "Tell me more about the knights' plans. Did they mention where they were going?"

Sapnap nodded and quickly darted over to the nearby table to grab the map he'd swiped from the

knights' quarters. "Yeah, and their plan is fucking stupid. They're starting along the highway until they reach Manburg, then splitting into two groups and coming back to the Empire over the forests on either side. However, they're staying entirely airborne for—" Sapnap raised his hands in quotes — "Safety reasons. If Tubbo's in the forest, there's no chance of them seeing him."

George leaned back in his seat. "So we'll be looking for him in the forest, right?"

"Right." Sapnap placed a chicken bone in his mouth as though it were a toothpick and twiddled with it idly. "I found the messenger who'd been given Tubbo's letter. He was at a rest stop by the river when he got it — nowhere *near* the fucking highway, by the way." He rolled his eyes. "I doubt he's moved too much since then, so our best bet at finding him is starting along the left side of the forest and moving upwards along the path of the river. It's probably what Tubbo's using to guide himself."

"You've really thought this out," George said in awe. Map-reading had always been one of his worst skills. He was a king meant for council rooms and passive-aggressively polite arguments through letters and messengers. Battle plans and maps? That had been his father's territory, and George was happy to leave it like that.

"I want to find this kid," Sapnap replied softly. "I can tell it's weighing on Dream too. He's been..." something shifted in Sapnap's expression, but George couldn't tell exactly what. "Odd."

"Where is he?" George asked nervously.

Sapnap pointed to the small guest bedroom. "Having a little sulk. I think he's overwhelmed with this Tubbo shit. Good luck getting him to admit that, though."

"Are you sure I didn't do anything?"

"Not that I know of." Sapnap looked away and spat the chewed bone he had in his mouth back onto the plate. "You can go ask him if you're that nervous. Since you guys are friends now or whatever."

"Yeah." George flushed. "I just hope he won't bite my head off."

Sapnap hefted himself off the couch cushion and stretched his arms. "Great! You handle the pissbaby. I'm off to take a nap in the knights' quarters before we leave. Come down when it's time to go. See you two weirdos later."

Once alone, George found himself feeling extraordinarily awkward in the silence of his rooms. What had Dream told Sapnap of that afternoon? Had Dream even found their tender banter out of the ordinary at all?

"I think you're looking at me."

"And if I was, George?"

A jolt shot up his spine as if someone were plucking his nerves like violin strings. *He bantered back. He couldn't have found it weird, right? He was at least sort of into it.*

George took a nervous gulp of his tea. The heat of it gave him a burst of confidence, and he darted to the guest bedroom's door before stopping as he raised his hand to knock. The familiar tightness of anxiety roiled in his belly. *I don't want him angry at me. I don't want to intrude.*

I don't want him to not want me there.

George knocked three times. “Dream?”

A grunt was Dream’s only answer. Good enough.

“Do you want to start another book with me?”

Chapter End Notes

this just in: colourblind British gogy drinks tea to get rid of Gay Thoughts™. More at seven.

where is the boy!!! Where is our lad!!!! Is he even still alive??? Who knows!!!!

FYI Tommy is my favourite character in this au and that’s why I let him go buck fucking wild at any point djdkhfkf

-Ophelia

Rescue Mission

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What?”

“We finished The Village That Went Mad,” George said hesitantly. “I was wondering if you’d like to start another one. We’ve got a couple hours before nightfall anyway.”

There was silence on Dream’s end for several moments. George fought the urge to smack himself. *Of course he doesn’t want to read. He wants to be left alone, idiot! Way to go and—*

“Uh,” Dream said, his voice choppy and unsure. “Yeah. Sure. Why not.”

George pushed the door open but lingered in the doorway, unable to force his legs to move. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t normal. Dream had been by his side for nearly a decade and George had never once felt the uncertainty he felt in that moment. He’d never had anything to be uncertain *about*. Dream had always been the same, day in and day out. Nothing ever changed.

But now, something had, and George wasn’t quite sure how to navigate the new unknown territory. So he did what he always did when threatened: sink back into familiarity.

“What’s up with you?”

Dream laid sideways on the small bed, facing away. At the sound of George’s voice, he shifted onto his back and threw an arm over his eyes. “Huh?”

“You look upset.” George leaned on the doorway and crossed his arms. “Why?”

“Why?” Dream scowled. “We have a missing twelve-year-old on our hands who may have already frozen to death because King Phil’s knights have brains the size of peas. That’s why.”

“It has nothing to do with the fact that you got socked in the face by Prince Tommy?”

“Did you come in here to show me another book or mock me?” Dream snapped, rising up on his elbows. His features were tight and stony, his eyes heavy-laden with the weight of his stress. The dark purple bruises beneath them did not make him look any friendlier.

George bit his tongue. “I came in here to stop you from wallowing in your own misery for the next two hours. I’d be happy to read to you if it would help you lighten up.”

Dream only grunted. “I have a book already picked out,” George continued. “I think you’ll like it. It’s a bit darker than the last one.”

“What’s it called?”

“The Lost City Of Mizu. It’s about a group of fishermen finding an abandoned underwater city with only one guy left alive in it. Creepy as shit, but it’s a super good read.”

“Fine.” Dream shifted to face the wall again. “But don’t expect me to be able to read shit. I’m not in the mood for it.”

Something about being able to read to Dream again made George’s heart race as he ran to grab the

book from his bedside table. It was nice when it was just the two of them. Dream was always softer, less rough around the edges, as though he allowed himself to truly relax. With everything going on around them, it was nice to have that slight bit of privacy, away from the eyes of even their closest friends. Though George was admittedly becoming fonder and fonder of Sapnap with each day, something about his presence didn't calm him the way Dream's did.

George sat down beside Dream and placed the book on his hip. "At least try and read the title. You already know what it is." He said.

Dream grabbed the book, pulled it to his face, and scanned the gold-plated title with narrowed eyes. "The letters are familiar. I think I've got the alphabet down, at least."

"You're basically halfway to being able to read on your own!" George smiled. "It's all a matter of practice now."

"No practicing today," Dream said, shifting to face George. He placed the book in George's lap then tucked both of his hands beneath his head as if he were sleeping. "You read to me."

It took a mere two pages of reading for Dream's body language to begin changing. His stern expression evened out as the minutes ticked by and the constant tension in his shoulders finally began to give way into a sleepy softness as George finished the third chapter. George hadn't read *The Lost City Of Mizu* since he was fourteen, but the antics of Cletus and the rest of the fishermen came back to him in vivid, comforting waves of nostalgia.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

George blinked. He hadn't even noticed he'd begun to smile at all. "I loved this book when I was a teenager," he said. "It's an incredible story."

"I like it," Dream hummed. "Ranbob is my favourite character so far."

"I thought so. You're always into the mysterious weirdos." George stuck his finger in the place of a bookmark and flipped through the rest of the book idly. "The copy I had had little drawings in it. This one doesn't."

"Does it show what Ranbob looks like?"

"There was one drawing of him, I think. A big long one. He took up the whole margin of the page."

Dream chuckled. "Is he cool-looking?"

George traced his finger up the outer margin of one of the pages, remembering the crude artist's rendition that had nearly given him nightmares as a teenager. "Anything with yellow and purple eyes looks cool. A *silverfish* with yellow and purple eyes would look cool."

"I'll take that as a yes," Dream said with a small laugh. "I like mystery. It makes my brain happy."

"I've got a whole bookshelf of mystery books back home. I'll show it to you when we take back the castle."

"Yeah." Dream trained his eyes on the ceiling. "I'll look forward to it."

There was a speckle of spider veins down the curve of his jaw, slicing through a particularly wide scar. *You never did let them get near you with needles to stitch you up*. George felt his hand wanting to rise, to trace the whitened tissue with a fingertip. *I'm pretty sure you broke the wrist of*

the medic who tried.

Dream's eyes shifted, and for a long moment, they stared at each other, suspended and teetering on some unseen ledge. *What happened this afternoon, Dream?* George wanted to scream. *Are you thinking about it too?*

Something flitted behind Dream's eyes and he looked away, pursing his lips. With a push of his hands, he moved himself up into a sitting position. "Don't be mad at me when I say this."

George's heart dropped. "Okay, nothing good ever follows that sentence."

"Try to have an open mind." Dream cracked his knuckles nervously. "I don't want you coming with me and Sapnap tonight."

George started. "What the fuck do you mean?"

"It's dangerous," Dream said stiffly. "If Sapnap and I get captured, I don't want you stuck with us!"

"We need all the eyes we can get. Tubbo's time is limited!"

Dream hefted himself off the bed and paced to the door, pressing at his temple. "Sapnap and I can manage alone! You aren't trained for this!"

"No." George fought to keep his voice calm. *Not now. You're not pulling this shit now.* "I'm coming with you guys. I refuse to sit here in my fancy little room sipping fancy fucking tea while a child freezes to death outside!"

"Shh!" Dream hissed. "Do you want someone to hear you?"

"I want you to listen to me! I want to help!"

"You can help by staying safe and giving me one less thing to worry about!"

"Fucking hell—" George pressed at his eyes with his fingers— "You can't change my mind, Dream. We're equals now. It's like you said; my crown doesn't mean shit out here. I need to learn to take care of myself."

"It's my job to take care of you! You don't need to take care of yourself!"

"*Enough !*" George slammed his hand down on the bed, shaking the wooden frame. Dream froze, eyes burning. "I'm coming with you guys. End of story."

"George—" Dream started.

"We're all going to find Tubbo together, whether you like it or not."

Dream's face twisted. "George—"

George threw his hands up. "*What?*"

Dream closed his eyes and exhaled a sharp breath. "You can come, but if you get hurt out there tonight, I'm never letting you come on another mission. Deal?"

"Deal," George said. "Have faith in me, Dream. I'm not an idiot."

“I never said you were. It’s the Eretians I don’t trust.” One of Dream’s hands lifted to his face and rubbed at a scar. “I don’t like taking risks with your safety.”

“And I thank you for that,” George said. “But you can’t protect me from everything. A life of a king is a dangerous one. I have to be capable of keeping myself safe.”

Dream did not seem totally convinced, but he nodded nonetheless. George laid back on the small bed and closed his eyes, feeling a weight on his shoulders that wasn’t there before. Their mission loomed ahead of him, cloaked in darkness and uncertainty and the frigid air of the forest. They’d be out there that night, going against all of Phil’s orders.

The fact that George didn’t know where he’d be the next morning sent ice down his spine.

“We’re going to find that kid,” Dream murmured, mostly to himself. “He’s going to be alright.”

George cracked an eye open. Dream had moved to the small chair by the window and sat with his head resting on the windowpane, watching the final rays of sunlight dip below the line of trees on the horizon. *Sapnap was right*, George thought with a slight burst of awe. *You’re terrified by all this.*

He rose quickly, not allowing himself time to overthink, and crossed the room to Dream’s side. “Scooch,” he said, motioning to the small wicker chair Dream was sat on.

Dream raised an eyebrow. “There’s barely enough room for me here.”

“King’s orders.”

Dream shuffled over with a huff, crossing one leg over the other to give George enough space to squeeze in next to him. George rested his elbows on the windowsill and closed his eyes, taking a moment to bask in the sunset’s warmth. “I know you’re scared for the prince, Dream,” He said. “I am too.”

Dream turned his head away. “I don’t like kids being out in the woods alone. I know how cold it can get.”

“We’re going to do all we can. I have faith in us.”

“I do too,” Dream said softly. “But it may already be too late.”

“There’s nothing we can do about that.”

“That’s why it fucking hurts.”

Dream sighed, and his shoulders fell forward. “I was his age, you know? When I was in the woods. I was—“

Dream pressed a hand to his mouth. Redness began to crawl up his mottled cheeks and his eyes went glassy, pained by some faraway memory. “I don’t like when kids are cold,” he managed to force out. “Kids aren’t built for that shit.”

George remembered the gaunt child Dream had been on the day he’d been named George’s protector. Out of all the memories he had, that one had never fallen victim to time and gone fuzzy in his mind’s eye. He remembered the strangeness of Dream’s face, stuck somewhere between emaciation and childish roundness after six months of proper meals. He remembered Dream’s hair, matted and knotty.

He remembered hating him right there. Hating everything he meant. Hating him and swearing to hate him until the day he died.

Dream leaned into him ever so slightly. George's chest grew tight.

So much for that promise, little me.

"You're a good guy, Dream. I know you're trying your best." George focused his eyes on a glittering snow pile balancing on a branch. "Don't blame yourself if we can't get there in time."

Dream smiled weakly. "You're asking the impossible of me."

"You seem pretty good at doing the impossible."

"Gods, you're such an idiot."

The small chuckle that bubbled from deep within Dream's chest left George feeling warm. *I like making you laugh.*

"We've got another couple hours before we can go meet Sapnap," George said. "Want me to read to you some more?"

Dream perked immediately. "Yeah!"

"Think you could try and read a couple sentences on your own?"

"You're pushing it," Dream warned, but a smile had already made its way across his face. "It depends on how much I like the story."

George cocked his head in the direction of the bed. "Come on, then."

Dream raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Bringing me to bed, your Highness?"

George felt heat rise in his cheeks. "Fuck off!" He spluttered, landing a solid kick to the back of Dream's shin as he darted to the bed, wheezing as he went. *He's joking around with me. He's actually joking around with me.*

Something about that thought made George's heart rise into his throat. He froze in his tracks, watching Dream throw himself onto the bed with a huff and squirm a little to get comfy. "You coming?" He said.

"Yeah." George forced his legs to move. There was a match in his chest, dragging itself along his ribs.

A spark bloomed to life and George's stomach twisted itself into a knot.

Oh, fuck.

~

"Does that fit right?"

George rolled his shoulders, feeling the plates of iron and leather shift with his movement. "I think so," he said. "I'm not really sure how it's supposed to feel, though."

Sapnap tightened a buckle on the guards over George's calf and sat back on his heels. "As long as

it's not too tight, not too loose, and doesn't hurt, you should be good."

George lifted his arms over his head and swung them in circles. The armour was an added weight his body was not used to, but that was somewhat comforting given the fear that bubbled within him. "I'm good then," he said. Nodding, Sapnap returned to fixing his own armour. Since he'd be the one leading them with the map, Dream had given him most of the iron armour, as well as a black scarf that hid most of the lower half of his face. With the sword hanging at his side, he looked like a bonafide menace. George himself, however, felt like a child playing dress-up in his father's old war things.

Dream walked out of one of the barrack rooms, tying a piece of fabric over his mouth and nose. He took one look at George and narrowed his eyes. "That chestplate is too big for you."

"No it's not!" Sapnap said. "I put it on him myself."

"There's way too much space beneath his armpits!" Dream beckoned George closer and placed his hands on George's waist, jiggling the chestplate side to side. "It's huge on him!"

George felt his breath hitch as Dream leaned closer and lifted one of his arms. "Tell me if it's too tight," Dream said, tugging on the trio of buckles along George's side. His hands were warm and steady, his brows furrowed in concentration. He was so close to George that George could see the individual freckles speckling his cheeks.

I am in such deep shit. "That's good," George murmured.

Dream took a step back and scanned him over skeptically. "I'm going to get you a scarf too. Can't risk you being recognized."

"Do it quick, then." Sapnap hefted their backpack of supplies over his shoulder. "We should be out of here in the next ten minutes."

"We'll meet you in the stables," Dream said, retreating back into the barracks. "I'm going to fit George for some gloves and a scarf."

Sapnap nodded and disappeared down the hallway, surprisingly quiet for someone in so much armour. George's heart began to beat quicker. *Ten minutes until we leave. Hold on, Tubbo.*

A grey scarf landed on George's shoulder, breaking him from his thoughts. "Try these on." Dream handed him a pair of worn leather gloves lined with fleece. When George outstretched his hand to take them, Dream simply put one of the gloves into his mouth and slid the other one onto George's hand himself. "Does that fit? They were the warmest-looking ones there."

"Yeah." George prayed his cheeks weren't as red as they felt. Dream slipped the other glove on and turned George's hand over in his palm, moving his fingers himself.

"Good," Dream said quietly. "You're still sure you want to go?"

George straightened his shoulders. "Of course."

Dream sighed. "Let's be on our way, then. Sapnap will need help saddling the horses."

He'd almost made it to the door by the time George mustered enough courage to speak. "Dream?"

Dream turned. With so much of his face covered, it was reminiscent of their older days. George couldn't read him, couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Yeah?"

"I'll be safe, I promise," George said. "I'll listen to you and Sapnap. Focus on Tubbo and don't worry about me."

Dream breathed a low chuckle. "Thank you, George. I will."

A peace settled between them, light on George's shoulders. For the first time since their plan had been made, he felt a sense of hope. When Dream reached over as they walked together in silence and gave his shoulder an encouraging squeeze, George's heart did a flip. *We might actually have a chance at finding this kid alive. We might actually do this.*

That peace, however, disappeared the moment they walked through the stable doors.

"Fucking finally!" Sapnap stomped up to them, red-faced. "We have a problem here."

A small figure bundled up in ill-fitting gear armour dashed out of one of the nearby stalls and landed a punch to Sapnap's side. "You guys lied to me!"

"Tommy?" Dream practically shrieked. "The fuck are you doing here?"

The little prince looked noticeably worse than the last time George had seen him. He was ragged, bruised, and so furious that George could have sworn there was smoke rising from his ears. Tommy whirled to face Dream and stuck a finger in his face. "*I'm* going off to find my friend because you are all useless!" He said. "I guess you three finally got your cowardly heads out of your asses and are actually taking my friend's life seriously!"

"We already had a plan to go before we saw you," Dream hissed, bending down to face the boy at eye-level. "Maybe we would have told you if you hadn't nearly broken my nose!"

"You're a bitch!" Tommy shoved Dream backwards. "You guys still aren't taking this seriously!"

George grabbed Dream's arm as he leaned forward with his eyes blazing. "Tommy," he said softly, pulling Dream backwards a couple steps. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you, but we're going out now to look for him. Take that armour off and go back to bed. We'll handle this."

He tried to give the boy a comforting smile, but Tommy only curled his nose and fluffed his wings. "Fuck no. I'm coming with you guys."

"Absolutely not!" Dream and Sapnap shouted in near unison.

"Tommy," George repeated. "We can't let you do that. Your dad will kill us."

"I'm the only one who's capable of finding Tubbo!" Tommy replied through gritted teeth. "You have to let me come along!"

"Sapnap," Dream cut in. "Go saddle the horses with George. I'll handle this."

He advanced and grabbed Tommy by the arm, dragging him a few steps in the direction of the door. Tommy shrieked, kicking at Dream's arm. "If you don't let me come along with you guys, I'll scream! I'll wake the whole castle!"

Dream stopped. "You wouldn't."

Tommy wrenched himself from Dream's grip. "I would!"

"You're putting Tubbo's rescue at risk!"

“I can help you guys if I come along! I can fly!” Tommy pleaded. “Tubbo and I have so many codes and shit that we can use!”

Dream put his head in his hands. “Aether fucking almighty. You’re a prince, Tommy! What if we get captured?”

“You’re letting George come along, and he’s a king!”

Dream shot George the quickest but dirtiest of glances. George sucked in a quiet breath through his teeth. *Sorry, Dream.*

“We have to get going, guys.” Sapnap emerged from the stalls, holding the reins to three horses. “Time is of the essence.”

“Fuck.” Dream grabbed Tommy by the arm again. “You ride on my horse with me and you do exactly as I say. Got it?”

Tommy brightened immediately and saluted. “Yes, sir!”

Sapnap helped George onto the back of a sleek chestnut mare while Dream got a grinning Tommy settled on their black stallion. “Stay close to me,” Sapnap said as he handed George the reins. “Dream I can trust, but I’ve never seen you ride.”

“I can ride well enough to stay on.” George fixed the leather helmet on his head and swallowed the fear in his throat. “You can count on me.”

Sapnap exhaled. “Alright. Let’s pray to all the gods we know that nothing goes wrong. You and Tommy are pretty precious cargo.”

Tommy, tucked up against Dream’s chest like a baby penguin, raised his fists excitedly. “Let’s go find Tubbo!”

Sapnap swung open the stable doors and a wall of bitter air hit George’s face. He leaned down close to his reins and tightened his grip on his horse’s sides.

Let’s go find this prince.

~

The sliver of moonlight reflecting off of Sapnap’s armour was the brightest thing George could see for miles. The rest of the forest around them had long since melted into long, frightening shadows over their near two hours of fruitless search. With the sky as cloudy as it was, they were in near total darkness. Had it not been for the icy river’s glimmering surface leading their way, George would have become disoriented the moment they left the castle grounds.

Sapnap led the way a couple paces ahead, trotting along with the map in one hand and the reins in the other. He was silent, his only directions being short hand signals he threw back to them. Tommy and Dream were at the back of the group, arguing quietly from what George could hear. George felt safer between the two knights, but only slightly. He hated being so vulnerable beneath the open sky, uncovered on all sides. All it would take was one arrow, one well-placed trap, and they’d all be screwed.

Tommy sneezed. Dream shushed him. George curled his stiff fingers and wondered what things were like back home.

“Alright,” Sapnap said. “This is his estimated location. Keep your eyes peeled.”

All of a sudden, Tommy let out a high-pitched whistle. All three horses jumped, and George turned just in time to see Dream clap a hand over Tommy’s mouth. “The fuck is wrong with you?” He whisper-shrieked.

“It’s my code with Tubbo!” Tommy replied sharply. “We use it when we’re playing manhunt and don’t want Ranboo to know where we are. He’ll recognize it if he’s around here!”

“He may also be unconscious, so we can’t rely simply on that,” Sapnap said. “Keep your eyes out!”

“Am I allowed to fly?” Tommy asked.

“Nope,” Dream answered immediately.

“Boring.” Tommy let out another high-pitched whistle. It was a quick three-note melody, reminiscent of the annoying birds that shrieked outside George’s window at the crack of dawn. Over and over Tommy repeated his tune, sending it into the bitter air in puffs of white steam. George felt the dread crawling up his spine grow with each second the forest around them remained silent. A quarter of an hour passed, and Dream had just begun to tell Tommy to knock it off when—

George yanked his horse to a halt. “I heard something.”

“What?” Dream said. “I didn’t hear anything.”

It was a faint noise, barely even there, but George was certain he hadn’t hallucinated it. “Shh!” He waved a hand at the two knights, now staring at him curiously. Tommy’s eyes were the size of dinner plates. Another sound drifted to him over the babbling of the river. “It’s someone whistling back!”

Tommy jolted so hard it made Dream wobble in his seat. “Where? Where?”

“Up there!” George pointed up the river and kicked his horse into a canter. His heart was thumping in his ears, louder than the beating of his horse’s hooves over the frosty ground. Tommy glided over him, small wings flapping with all their might. “Do you hear it too?”

Tommy did not answer, but the expression on his face said enough. He dove ahead and landed at the base of a gnarled tree, falling to his knees as something staggered out of the tree line and collapsed in front of him.

“It’s him!” Dream galloped past him and was on the ground beside Tommy in the blink of an eye. “Sapnap! Get me the blanket!”

Dream picked the small figure up in his arms and moved into the small patch of moonlight on the trail. George’s stomach twisted. Sprawled in Dream’s arms was Tubbo, dressed in nothing but a thin pair of knitted pyjamas. He had several cuts along arms and legs, strikingly dark against his ghoulish, moon-lit skin. Something had even taken a chunk off the end of one of his horns, leaving it jagged and awkward. Sapnap practically jumped off his horse with a rolled-up blanket in his hands and knelt by Dream’s side.

“Tubbo! Tubbo!” Tommy cried. His wings were shaking, his eyes wide with tears. “We found you!”

Tubbo's eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth moving without sound. "We have to get back," Dream said sternly. "This kid's on death's door. Sapnap, you take Tommy at the front. I've got Tubbo."

We did it. We actually did it. The air in George's lungs was so light it seemed to be lifting him. *It was so easy. He's alive. We got him.*

Dream hopped back on his horse with Tubbo wrapped in his arms. "Let's go!" He shouted.

"Hold it!"

A figure cantered up to them from the other direction, holding a gloved hand in the air. It was a young woman, stern and straight-backed, with a head of pink hair pulled back into a neat bun. "Who are you all?"

Dream pulled Tubbo closer to his chest. "Farmers from the Antarctic Empire, ma'am," he said in a gentle voice.

The pink-haired woman narrowed her eyes. "It's far too late for farmers to be out along the river. It's dangerous."

"My little brother, he—" Dream pulled the blanket over Tubbo's horns and pressed him to his shoulder as if hugging him— "He ran away an hour or two ago. We've been looking for him all this time."

"Hm." The woman kicked her horse into motion and stepped closer to them. "Let me see the boy."

Fuck. George felt a jolt of panic go up his spine. Dream stiffened, but reluctantly allowed the woman to reach down and pull the blanket from Tubbo's face. She froze. "The prince!"

Something flashed in the moonlight as she moved and within moments she had a sword pointed at Dream's throat. "Get on your knees," she ordered. "And give me the boy."

She turned her head back down the path. "Jack!" She screamed. "I've found him!"

George's blood ran cold. *She's wearing the Eretian insignia on her shoulder.* "Dream—" he forced out. "She's an—"

"We weren't kidnapping him! He knows us!" Tommy cut him off.

A young man bearing the same insignia on his chest galloped up, holding a loaded crossbow. "Nikki! What's wrong?"

The woman jabbed her sword at Dream, who'd taken a couple steps backward in the direction of his horse. "They've got the prince. He's alive."

The young man's angular face split into a grin. "Awesome."

George tightened his grip on the reins and passed a panicked glance to Sapnap as the young man raised his crossbow. "All of you. Off your horses."

"No," Sapnap replied sharply. "Not a chance."

"*Now*," The young man snarled.

Tommy bent down and threw a rock at the young man's head, causing his horse to shriek. In the

moment the young man was preoccupied, he ripped the crossbow from his hands and launched himself into the sky, screaming wildly. Dream turned to George and Sapnap. “*GO!*”

George dug his heels into his horse’s side and was flying back down the river trail before he realized what was going on. Sapnap was no more than a greyish blur beside him, the beating of his horse’s hooves a continuous thundering in his ears. Tommy was nowhere to be seen. Dream was nowhere to be seen. George fought to regain control of his spinning head and twisted in his saddle to see back down the path. One of the Eretian mercenaries had disappeared along with Dream and Tubbo, but the other one had jumped off their horse and had Tommy by both wrists, wrestling him into the tree line.

“Tommy!” George yanked his horse sideways, making a turn so sharp it nearly threw him off. Sapnap yelled something as he shot back down the path, but George couldn’t hear his words over the sound of the blood roaring in his ears. He kicked his horse into a near-frantic gallop, the adrenaline in his veins dulling his fear, and careened into the mercenary’s horse. Both horses reared, screaming, and the mercenary let Tommy go in the moment of panic as their horse sped off into the darkness.

“Fuck you!” The pink-haired woman brandished her sword. She was panting, her hair tousled and knotted. The glint in her eyes was dangerous. She turned to a scrambling Tommy and raised her sword above her head.

“*NO!*”

George felt the metal hit the meat of his palm though his gloves with an excruciating squelch. He wrapped his fingers around the end of the blade, pulling it backwards with all his might as warm agony spread down his hand and arm. The mercenary stumbled, growled beneath her breath, then ripped her sword from George’s grip, slicing through the leather and into the skin of his fingers. “Damn you!” She snarled.

“George!” A voice from behind him cried.

The pain in George’s hand was nearly blinding. Stars swimming before his eyes, George pointed in what he believed was Tommy’s direction and screamed, “Get Tommy!” before galloping off again. He bent his head close to his horse’s mane as the wind roared by them, praying he didn’t pass out. The reins were slippery beneath his fingers. His injured hand had gone all but numb. He fell sideways, seeing nothing but darkness, but felt warm hands push his limp body back into his saddle. Someone tipped his head back and poured a potion down his throat.

“George! Wake up!”

Consciousness came back to him in a violent jolt. George bent forward, coughing up a mouthful of potion that spilt down the front of his jacket. Dream’s face came into view, his features fading in and out of focus. He had something dark in his arms. “Are you okay?” His voice filled George’s head with grainy waves of static. “Your Highness! Are you alright?”

“Tommy!” George choked. “Where’s Tommy?”

“Sapnap’s got him!” Dream placed a hand on George’s face. “Are you going to pass out?”

“Not yet!” George forced his tingling legs to squeeze his horse’s sides and the chestnut mare sprung into action, carrying him off down the path. He watched Sapnap pass him, shouting commands George’s fuzzy brain could barely register. He had Tommy pressed to his back, wings outstretched behind him. Tommy met George’s eyes and grinned tearfully. *We got him. We’re*

alright.

Their pace didn't slow until they reached the castle gates, where several servants waved them down. King Phil stood on his balcony above them, staring down at them with wide, stony eyes. Both of Tommy's brothers, dressed in pyjamas, surrounded Sapnap's horse and pulled Tommy into their arms.

"I've got the prince!" George heard Dream yell. There were servants and stablehands everywhere, pulling him down from his horse and into the orange glow of the castle's lamplights. He was so tired. He could not feel his hand. Dark droplets landed in the snow with each one of his steps.

King Phil landed in front of him, ringed by lamplight as though he were an angel. He outstretched his arms and George fell into them as his vision faded. "I'm sorry, Phil," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Chapter End Notes

me: guys look! Dream and Goby are crushing on each other!
y'all, holding pitchforks: where the FUCK IS OUR BOY TUBBO

I watched the most recent Tales Of The SMP and wow i rly predicted Villain! Eret hehe
😊 /j

y'all are SO SWEET all of the comments were actually worried abt Tommy and how he's handling his grief I love it sm PLEASE keep telling me all ur thoughts and opinions they help me so much

Follow my tumblr @opheliabloo and come say hi! I'm happy to answer any questions
y'all have :)

-Ophelia

Fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil slammed the door behind him so loudly that it made Tommy's frostbitten ears sting. "You—he seethed. "You *stupid* —"

"Where is Tubbo?" Tommy pushed against his father's arm as he yanked him farther into his bedroom. "Dad! Where is Tubbo?"

"Quiet!" His father bellowed. His eyes were ablaze in a way Tommy had never seen before. "Aether fucking almighty, Tommy! What is wrong with you?"

Tommy's heel caught on a piece of ripped-up pillow as he stepped back and sent him tumbling to the ground. He landed hard on his tailbone, shooting pain up his already-aching spine. The euphoria and adrenaline from his mission was fading fast and fear began to hold his chest in a vice grip as his father advanced on him, wings raised and bristling. "Dad!" He choked out.

"I cannot fucking believe you! I thought you were smarter than this!" Phil ran his hands through his hair. "Sneaking out? Really, Tommy? *Really?* "

"I had to find Tubbo!" Tommy screamed. "He was going to die if I didn't go and find him!"

"You put yourself directly into the hands of the Eretians! Do you know how much damage you could have caused?"

Tommy's tongue felt like a heavy weight in his mouth. "I had protection!"

"You had King George and his guards, who weren't even supposed to be out themselves!"

"Fuck off! This is stupid! *You* are stupid!" Tommy buried his face in his hands. *I need to see Tubbo. I need to make sure he's alright.*

Phil clenched his hands into fists. "Do *not* call me stupid, Tommy! I am the king of this country and I have kept us war-free for my whole reign," He said through gritted teeth. "I would have had to give that up if you got captured. Nearly two decades of peace, Tommy! Down the fucking drain! For you!"

"You let Wilbur and Techno go out on missions!" Tommy cried. His mind was screaming *leave, leave! Escape from here!* But his body felt like lead and his hands were beginning to shake and his father's looming figure above him struck fear so deeply into his chest that it ripped the air from his lungs.

"Wilbur is smart enough to not get himself into dangerous situations and any country that dared take Technoblade hostage would be paying *us* to take him back within the hour!" Phil replied angrily. "They're different than you, Tommy! They have the spirits of kings!"

"I know that they're better than me! Don't rub it in!"

"You cannot be mad that I take them more seriously than you when you go ahead and jeopardize this country's safety for fun!"

Tommy forced down the lump in his throat. He couldn't cry, not now. The hurricane in his chest threatened to explode forth and eat everything in its path but Tommy shoved it down and clenched his jaw to keep from screaming. *Hurricane Tommy exists because Prince Tommy isn't listened to, isn't taken seriously, he wanted to scream. The reason there isn't a Hurricane Wilbur or a Hurricane Technoblade is because there doesn't need to be.*

Then came the anger, hot and sharp and a welcome distraction from his anguish. His father seemed to notice it take control, for his wings spread instinctively as if blocking him in. "I hate you!" Tommy screamed. The words burned on his tongue but the pain was satisfying. "Fuck you! I hate you!"

Pushing through the pain in his exhausted body, Tommy struggled to his feet and pointed a finger in his father's face. "You would have let Tubbo die! He would be dead by now if it wasn't for me!"

His father's face twisted. "Tommy—"

"You knew the plan with the knights was idiotic—"

"Tommy —"

"—and you know that you failed Manburg by being a coward!"

"*QUIET!*"

The slap happened so quickly it left Tommy's head spinning. He staggered sideways and hit the end of his bed as his knees buckled beneath him. His cheek stung. His eyes stung. One of his ears was ringing and something warm dribbled down his chin as he lifted his head to meet his father's eye. "You hit me."

Tommy had done worse things to his father before. He'd screamed until his throat was raw, thrown glassware and plates of food onto the walls and floor, sworn himself to angry silence for days on end. He'd taken swords from the model knights outside each door and sent them flying through the windows, ripped at his father's feathers when he was trying to pin him down. He'd done so many awful things that he couldn't even begin to count them.

Never once had his father hit him.

Until then.

"You hit me," Tommy repeated. "You hit me."

His father's face had gone slack, eyes slightly widened. The silence between them was deafening. "Tommy," he whispered. He seemed unable to say anything else. "Tommy."

The anger in his veins retreated and Tommy sat there on his floor for a few long moments, blood dribbling from the slit in his lip. He felt nothing. "You hit me."

A fresh wave of terror filled him from head to toe and suddenly he was on his feet, moving without purpose. He ran in a blind panic out the doors of his room and into the darkened halls, watching them warp and bend beneath his feet. *I need my friend*, his frazzled mind focused on a single thought. *I need my friend. I need my friend.*

I need to go find Tubbo.

~

Dream pressed his thumb to the back of George's hand. His bandages looked too tight. *Tight bandages means poor circulation which means swelling which means pain.* Sighing, he gently tugged at the end of bandage below his wrist until it came loose. He'd do it right this time. He was sure.

"Dream, you've re-wrapped his hand three times. Leave it alone."

Dream tucked the bandage back in place and forced his hands into his lap. From his seat in the infirmary on the other wall, Sapnap gave him a slow, tired shake of his head. Though he was smiling, the air around them was thick and heavy with their worry. They hadn't been allowed to see Tubbo since they'd reached the castle, and listening to his muffled screams through the walls bothered Dream far more than he'd ever admit aloud.

In the bed beside him, George lay on his side with his closed eyes scrunched in discomfort. It seemed that the moment his stern features began to soften and even out, a twitch from his injured hand or a stray noise from down the hall would make him jerk awake, moaning beneath his breath. Dream hated it. *Sleep, you idiot. You're the only one out of us who can right now.*

The memory of the pink-haired woman's blade slicing through the flesh of George's hand replayed in his head in a stubborn loop, torturously vivid despite his exhaustion. *Stupid fucking idiot.* Dream leaned his head on one of his hands. His shoulder had begun to ache again. *Stopping a sword with your fucking hand. How stupid can you be?*

As stupid as you were to stop a knife with your fucking face, a voice in his head hissed back.

"Dream?" Sapnap's voice tore him from his thoughts. "Are you alright?"

Phantom slashes on his face stung. "Mmhmm," Dream murmured. "Just tired."

"We got the kid, Dream. He's alive." Sapnap leaned his head back on the wall. "We did it."

"Let's hope that'll make King Phil less inclined to kick our asses for this."

King Phil had certainly not taken kindly to their mission. With George limp and blood-soaked in his arms, he didn't have time to do more than pass them off to the medics and instruct Technoblade to send patrols out to the border, but the fury in his eyes had been bright enough to scare everyone around him into near-silent submission. Once Tommy had been checked over and deemed healthy, he'd been grabbed by the elbow and dragged off.

Gods. Dream hoped the kid was still alive.

So, with baited breath and heavy stomachs, they waited. Sapnap bounced his leg, George half-slept, and Dream replayed the moment he saw the bones moving within the gash in George's palm over and over in his head until a headache bloomed above one of his eyes.

"Try to sleep, dude," Sapnap said quietly. "I can tell you're thinking about shit you shouldn't be thinking about."

"I can't switch my brain off, Sapnap." Dream wanted nothing more than to collapse in a bed and cry until he knocked himself out. "I wish I could, but I can't."

George shifted at his words, shuffling away from him without opening his eyes. "Here," he said, patting the empty end of the pillow. "Lay your head down and try to rest."

“No!” The words came out on instinct. “You rest. I’m fine here.”

One of George’s dazed, heavy-lidded eyes opened and stared at him in displeasure. “Rest. King’s orders.”

“And Sapnap’s orders,” Sapnap piped in.

“Screw you both.” Dream planted his cheek on the starched cotton and couldn’t stop the sigh that drifted from his lips as his body relaxed. He was sure he’d sleep for days the second he was allowed to.

George let out a triumphant chuckle as he closed his eye again, grimacing slightly as he moved his hand closer to his chest. “How’s your hand?” Dream found himself asking.

“It hurts like a bitch,” George replied gruffly. “The medics said I was lucky to have all my tendons still intact.”

Dream clenched his jaw at the mental image that flashed behind his eyelids. “I still have the healing medicine up in your room from my shoulder. I’ll help you put some on when we can.”

“Your shoulder is barely healed,” George said. “You use it. Technoblade will make me something else.”

“I at least want you to try it. It really helped with my pain.”

“Would that make you feel better? If I used some?”

Dream pursed his lips. The last thing he needed at that moment was to be psychoanalyzed. “Yes, yes it would,” he said.

George smiled softly. “Then I’ll have a little when we get back to our room.”

“That’s *if* we get back,” Sapnap cut in. He had his eyes trained out the crack in the door. “Because I see Phil coming.”

Dream shot up into a sitting position so quickly it left his vision blurry. Phil pushed open the door, considerably less frazzled than when they’d seen him last, and welcomed himself in with a quick nod in a half-asleep George’s direction. The door closed with a click, leaving Phil standing in the middle of the room with his hands folded in front of him. “Boys,” was all he said. Exhaustion hung heavy from his words.

“I came up with it — the idea to sneak out,” Dream blurted into the silence that followed. Phil’s stormy eyes seemed to sear right down to his bones. “It’s my fault. I forced these two to come along with me.”

“What you did was incredibly stupid.” Phil’s voice was quick, sharp, meticulously contained. “You could have cost me many lives if something had gone wrong.”

“I know. I know.” Dream yearned for his mask. His scarf may have covered his mouth and nose, but even only having his eyes bared to King Phil’s disappointment was overwhelming. “I can’t apologize enough.”

“You’ve all undermined my authority today,” Phil continued. “I can barely express in words how much shame that brings me. And to bring my youngest son along? I could consider that a crime.”

His jaw clenched, pulling his mouth into a tight line. He turned his head away from them and sighed through his nose. “Your only saving grace was bringing Prince Tubbo here alive. For that, I will forgive this transgression. But I will not forget it.”

George audibly sighed in relief. “Tubbo’s alive?” He whispered.

“Yes. Malnourished, frostbitten, and traumatized, but alive. If I were a better man, I’d thank you all for it.” Phil looked down at his hands. “George, I’d like you to stay here with me. Dream and Sapnap, you’re free to your rooms. I’d rather you not visit Tubbo until tomorrow morning. He’s... overwhelmed right now.”

Dream watched George stiffen out of the corner of his eye and sucked at his teeth. “May I request to stay with King George?” He asked quietly. “I’m not comfortable leaving him alone while he’s injured.”

“He’s not alone, he’s with me.” Phil’s tone made it clear the matter was not negotiable. “I shall not keep him for long. Go to your rooms and rest.”

Little was said between Dream and his friend as they walked the empty halls. Every servant, maid, or medic in the castle was either in bed or aiding Tubbo, so the halls were eerily silent without the hum of daily chatter. Sapnap undid his fingerless gloves and stuffed them in his pocket, flexing his bare hands over and over. “We got the kid, Dream.” His voice was tired, gentle, void of the triumph that filled them hours before. “He’s okay. He’s alive.”

“King George isn’t okay,” Dream replied. “He took a sword to the hand.”

Sapnap chuckled deep in his chest. “If that’s our worst injury of the night, I’d consider us lucky.”

Sapnap was right, as much as it bothered Dream to admit. He should be thanking his lucky stars a wound that would barely even scar was the only thing they had to show for a mission held together by teenaged spite and blind confidence. If it had been he himself who’d have been injured, Dream would have probably considered the night a rousing success.

If it had been anyone else but him injured, it wouldn’t be bothering you right now.

“Yeah.” Dream shoved the thought from his mind. “Yeah, I guess.”

“If *I* was the one who got a sword to the hand,” Sapnap continued, “You’d shoo me off to bed and remind me to drink my healing potions. There wouldn’t be one ounce of this sulky shit.”

“Shut it,” Dream snapped. “I’m not sulking. It’s been a long night.”

“Can you at least admit that you’re bothered that it was him who got injured?”

Mind-reading asshole. “It’s my job to protect him! Of course it stings a little more when he’s hurt.” The hallways’ ceilings glimmered in the yellowish torchlight. It hurt Dream’s eyes. “If it was you, I’d know you could handle it. George isn’t like that.”

Sapnap raised an eyebrow. “George watched his dad die in front of him from an infected arrow wound and then took a whole country onto his shoulders at nineteen years old. He’s not necessarily a delicate little flower.”

Dream opened his mouth to answer, only to hurriedly pull his scarf over his face as a winged nurse soared over their heads, carrying various medical tools in her arms. The fright in her eyes put a pit in Dream’s stomach. “I never said he was,” he said once she’d disappeared up the nearby stairwell.

“He’s very capable. He’s just not used to swords and shit.”

They reached the base of the curved stairwell and Sapnap stopped, pensively fiddling with his hands. “Are you coming?” Dream asked.

“I think I’m going to sleep in the knights’ quarters again,” Sapnap answered with a yawn. “King George will be fine with you.”

Dream frowned. “I don’t want you being alone.”

Chuckling lightly, Sapnap gave him a friendly punch to the arm. “Not all of us are as emotionally fucked as you. I’m not going to go sulk, I promise. That’s your specialty.”

He removed his vest and threw it to Dream, along with his gloves. “Keep those safe for me. I don’t trust the knights with my good leather.”

“I will,” Dream smiled. “Goodnight, dude. Thanks for your help tonight.”

“No problem. Anything to help you out.” Sapnap turned and began back down the hall, giving him a wave. “No more sulking!”

Dream watched him leave, listening to his melodic whistling grow fainter as he walked away. Sapnap always whistled when Dream was upset. It was his quiet way of saying *I’m okay, don’t worry about me*. “Goodnight,” Dream said again, mostly to himself.

He hoped Tubbo, wherever that poor child was, could get a warm sleep that night. He out of all of them deserved it the most.

~

“How is Tubbo?”

Phil smoothed down his robes and sat where Sapnap had been. “I’ve already told you.”

“I want to know more,” George said. “Dream and Sapnap aren’t here. You don’t have to censor yourself.”

Phil pursed his lips. “He’s alive, George. That’s all that matters.”

“Was he conscious?”

“I’d rather not regale the gruesome details of a half-dead child to someone I should be kicking out on their ass for taking my twelve-year-old son out on a joyride mission,” Phil hissed. “Yes, he was conscious. Barely lucid enough to do anything but scream, but conscious nonetheless. Happy?”

George swallowed the lump in his throat. Phil’s anger may have been justified, but that didn’t make it any less scary. Phil exhaled sharply and turned his head to the window, staring out into the darkness. “I thought I could trust you to think like a king, George. I guess I was mistaken.”

“I couldn’t let that boy die, Phil,” George whispered. “I couldn’t sit there and do nothing.”

“You’re never doing nothing when you’re a king. You have to lead, bring peace to those who follow you. Sometimes that includes staying behind and leading from safety.” Phil rubbed at a bag beneath his eye. “What you did tonight was idiotic. You could have put my son or Tubbo in grave danger, let alone yourself and your guards. I’m disappointed in you.”

“I trusted Dream and he did not disappoint me. *We* are the reason Tubbo is in your infirmary rather than frozen solid on a riverside.” George blinked back the pressure building behind his eyes. “You can’t deny that.”

“I can’t.” There was an edge to Phil’s voice George couldn’t quite place. “But you’ll be lucky if you can ever write with that hand again.”

“I’ll learn to sew with it just to spite you.”

His remark hung in the air for a long moment. Then, Phil’s face broke into a small smile. He met George’s gaze, eyes glassy. “You sounded like your dad just there.”

“I feel like him too right now,” George said. His voice wobbled far more than he would have liked. “Injured and being berated by a fellow king. That’s how he spent most of his life.”

With a gasp, he bent forward into his hands, half-crying, half-laughing into his fingers. A shadow moved in front of him, blocking the room’s orange light, and surrounded him in warmth. George wrapped his arms around Phil’s waist and pressed the side of his face into the material of his long robes. “I’m sorry, Phil. I— I really am.”

Phil’s hands came to rest on George’s head, one along the back of his neck and the other one caressing smooth circles into his hair. “You’re young, George. Perhaps that’s why I can’t bring myself to stay mad at you,” He said softly. “Never do anything as foolish as what you did today ever again. I will not be so kind next time.”

“I’m happy to leave this at a truce.” George leaned back and pressed at his eyelids to stop the swelling. “Both of us are equally right and wrong. Let’s leave this behind us.”

Phil nodded, but something shifted in his body language as he sat down on a nearby bed and rubbed at his temples. “If I may, I’d like to ask a favour from you.”

“Of course. It’s the least I can do right now,” George said.

“Keep an eye on Tommy for me. After what happened tonight, I can’t see him coming to me much anymore.” Phil’s eyes fell to the floor. “I lost my temper tonight, and I fear the damage I caused to our relationship may be permanent.”

George sucked in a quiet breath. “What happened?”

Shame seemed to settle on the older man’s shoulders like an invisible pillory. “I struck him.”

“What?” George winced as his injured hand went to clench into a fist. “You punched him?”

“No, it was an open palm—” Phil clapped a hand to his forehead and dragged it down his face. “I slapped him. He called me a coward for failing Manburg and I slapped him. Now I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Gods, Phil,” George said incredulously. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ve never felt more ashamed in my life. Never once have I wanted to strike one of my children. Not once!” Phil cried. “And now I have and—” he choked— “And I fear I have crossed a boundary over which I cannot go back.”

Grabbing George by the hands, he raised them both to their feet. “I am not asking you to play therapist for my family,” Phil continued gravely, “Just make sure he’s okay if you ever see him

about. If he mentions wanting to come to me, encourage him. That's all I ask."

For a moment, his kingly demeanour slipped, and the man clutching George's hands was no more than a frightened, exhausted father, desperate to keep his grip on a child he could barely understand. "I will," George said, giving Phil's hands an encouraging squeeze. "I promise you that."

Phil pulled him in for a long hug, pressing a quick kiss to the top of George's head. "Thank you, my boy. Thank you. Go to bed, now. You and your knights are in definite need of a good sleep."

~

Dream's fire was well into a crackling roar by the time George ambled through the door, swaying ever so slightly. Rubbing at his eyes, he scanned the room. "Where's Sapnap?"

"He wanted to sleep in the knights' quarters. They're probably quieter without us snoring in them," Dream replied, sitting back on his heels. The fire felt glorious on his skin, which had retained the bitter chill of the forest and left him shivering for the better part of an hour. "He always needs a moment alone after being out."

"It's just us, then." George set his bunched-up cape on the floor and moved into the reach of the firelight, which lit his sharp features up in a blazing orange. "Go get your healing gel, please. My hand hurts."

Though it only took a moment for Dream to dart to his nightstand and find the small container of gel, George was already in his nightclothes and seemingly fast asleep in front of the fire when he returned. He was curled up on the floor, arms tucked beneath his head, looking almost cat-like in his serenity. When Dream sat down with the container in hand and poked at his shoulder, he only grumbled.

"I'll make it quick. Then you can sleep," Dream promised. "This will help with any infections."

George shifted onto his other side and placed his bandaged hand onto Dream's lap. "You must think I'm an idiot for stopping a sword with my hand," he yawned, his voice equally humorous and resigned.

"I do somewhat." Dream pulled the cloth off George's hand, revealing the deep slice in his palm. The flesh around it had gone a dark purple, camouflaging the lines of black thread used to sew it back together. The cuts on the insides of George's knuckles had developed thick scabs of half-coagulated blood, keeping his fingers in a perpetual bend. Dream touched one of his fingers gingerly, wincing as George murmured in pain. "But I also think you're brave."

George let out a short laugh. "I'm not brave. I nearly passed out in my own saddle afterwards."

"Doesn't matter." Dream dipped two fingers into the sweet-smelling gel, enjoying the familiar tingle on his fingertips. "You saved Tommy's hide. That's admirable."

"I'm flattered." George stiffened as the gel sunk into his wound, gritting his teeth until the initial sting wore off. "Fuck. You didn't tell me how much that would hurt."

"Sorry," Dream chuckled. "I said I'd get it over with quickly."

George slid his free hand beneath his head like a pillow and closed his eyes. A shadow of pink had returned to his pale cheeks. "Phil slapped Tommy today. He told me."

Dream paused. “What? He hit him?”

“Yep,” George said darkly. “Tommy called him a coward for failing Manburg and Phil slapped him. He feels terrible about it.”

“What about Tommy?” Dream asked.

“Phil hasn’t seen him since it happened; that’s why he told me in the first place,” George said. “He wants us to look out for him.”

There was a small glob of unused gel left on Dream’s finger when he was finished re-wrapping the wound. Mindlessly, he began to rub it into George’s hand, kneading at the delicate flesh with his thumbs. “We can do that,” He replied.

“You can’t beat him up anymore.”

“I don’t beat him up unless he gives me a reason to.” Dream squeaked as George’s knee collided with his back. “Fine, fine. I’ll be a bit more gentle with the little monster.”

“And Tubbo, too. I’m scared for him, Dream. This whole situation looks bad.”

Dream moved his mindless little massage to the base of George’s wrist. “He’s safe now, George. You don’t need to worry about him anymore. Tommy will be fine too, I’m sure of it.”

George opened his eyes and stared into the darkness of their room with empty eyes. “Can we go get something to eat?”

“You should sleep. I can go fetch you something if you’d like,” Dream offered.

“No, I want us to go together. I don’t want to be alone in here.” George shuddered. “I don’t really want to sleep anymore either.”

Dream thought for a moment. “The kitchen should be open. Whether or not they’ll be people in there is debatable, though.”

A weary smile crossed George’s face. “Let’s go there. Maybe we’ll find Tommy too.”

He stood, slightly unsteady on his tired legs. Bandaged, bruised, deliriously exhausted and in his wrinkled nightclothes — he hardly looked like a king. A year ago, seeing him in such a state would have been like seeing him naked. Dream probably would have talked Sapnap’s ear off over it. “*In his pyjamas!*” He would have cried. “*As if he were some drunkard!*”

But it was not a year ago. It was in the light of a roaring fire, with Sapnap’s words an echo in the back of Dream’s mind. “*Why are you so weird all of a sudden?*”

The answer to that question lay deep within him, buried under years of purposeful amnesia and bitter self-hatred. Despite his best attempts to stamp it into non-existence, it clung to life within him like a stubborn weed.

George’s smile, the slight giggle that played upon his lips as Dream stood up, the fury blazing in his eyes as he blocked the deadly ire of a swinging sword and saved a young boy’s life. All of it came too close to giving that stubborn weed the morsel of sunlight it needed to bloom once more.

Dream had nearly made that mistake once. There was not a chance he’d let it happen again. Especially not now.

“You lead the way, your Highness,” he said politely, handing George his cape. It sat upon his shoulders like a bath robe. “I’m right behind you.”

~

As Dream expected, they found the kitchen and adjoining mess hall empty save for a gaggle of young trainees bent over a keg of the shitty beer half the knights back home were addicted to. Though the young men scattered the moment they saw George, Dream couldn’t help but feel fond at the sight of them. He hoped that the Eretians weren’t as barbaric as to deny the SMP knights their alcohol. That bunch would choose go hungry than go dry any day.

“I wonder if they have any leftover bread,” George said. “I’m fucking famished.”

“Leftover bread sounds stellar right now.” Dream poked his head into the darkened kitchen and sniffed the air. It smelt of soap and spice. “Let’s get this place lit up and see what we can find.”

George went off to skulk about the iceboxes in the back while Dream lit the gas lamps on the walls, filling the small space with a familiar yellow glow. He and Sapnap had only dared a couple times to go root through the kitchen after hours when they were children, but the memory of choking back laughter through mouthfuls of stale biscuits in the light of a single candle filled his chest with warmth. Never once did he ever expect to do the same with King George.

George skittered back into the room, holding a plate of assorted pastries in his hands. “I feel so exhilarated right now,” he whispered, giggling in a high falsetto. “My dad would have killed me for this when I was a kid. Eating leftover pastries off the top of the bin pile? He would have washed my mouth with soap.”

He sat down across from Dream and pushed the plate between them. Sliding off his mask, Dream grabbed a square biscuit no bigger than his thumb and popped it in his mouth. It tasted of lemon. “You never snuck into the kitchen as a kid?”

“How could I have? You were guarding my door every night!” George laughed. “I was so sure you would have tattled that I didn’t even try.”

He grabbed his own pastry — a palm-sized one that leaked red jam as he broke it in half — and took a tentative bite. “Plus, it’s not like I had many friends to do it with, anyway.”

“You have friends!” Dream exclaimed. “What about all your lords-in-waiting?”

“They’re not friends! Hired acquaintances at most. I knew none of them actually liked me.” George licked a spot of jam off the corner of his lip. “Quackity was my only real friend.”

“And Karl.” Dream remembered the giggling lord-in-waiting quite clearly, mostly because he’d been so irritatingly energetic that Dream had daydreamed more than once about bouncing him off the walls like a sport ball. “Karl was your friend.”

George smiled softly. “Always a weird one, he was, but the nicest guy you’d ever meet. I haven’t heard from him since El Rapids collapsed. I hope he’s okay.”

Well, now my Karl-ball daydream makes me look like a dick. Dream grabbed the other half of George’s pastry and nibbled at it. Throwing out so many good pastries every day had to be some sort of crime, if not a downright sin. “Sapnap’s my only friend besides Bad. None of the other knights wanted to hang out with me after I got my job because they thought I was an ass-kisser.”

“What?” George frowned. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to isolate you.”

Dream waved his hand dismissively, scattering crumbs over both of their laps. “They were all blockheads anyway. Sappnap’s all I need.”

“And you have me now, too. That makes three friends.”

“That makes three. A very unlikely three.”

George averted his gaze as they fell into silence. “Hey, now you have an actual reason to keep saving my life. Can’t go back to only having two friends.”

“Oh, of course not. I’d look like the biggest chump around,” Dream chuckled. “My ego over having three friends is the only thing keeping me from throwing you to the Eretians.”

“Shut up.” George chucked a piece of pastry at him. “It’s not the only reason.”

Dream scooted sideways as George bent forward to grab another pastry. “It is! If you decided to stop being my friend again then I’d just leave you to be eaten by a ravager.”

“You’re such an idiot.” George pressed his lips together but couldn’t stop the toothy grin from bleeding through. “I’m going to fire you.”

“You’d be so bored without me!” Dream laughed.

“I’d finally have peace for once! I could invite so many people to my room and have so much loud, obnoxious sex —“

“Fuck off!” Dream whipped a pastry at him. George grabbed it and tried to throw it back, but Dream caught it in his palm with ease. George reached for another one, and without thinking, Dream blocked his arm with his chest and bowled the two of them over, holding George’s hands to his chest. The plate flipped as Dream’s knee hit its side, scattering pastries around them. “Don’t you fucking try,” Dream panted. “I am so much stronger than you.”

He was close enough to feel the warmth of George’s breath on his face. George’s mouth was slightly agape, his eyes wide. *Oh, fuck.* Dream shifted, pulling George’s torso upwards from where he’d been awkwardly bent backwards. *Oh, fuck.* Dream was practically sitting in his lap. Their legs were pressed together. George’s smile had faded. The world around them was still, silent, as if it were holding its breath. *Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.*

George closed his eyes. His wrists were still in Dream’s hands. Their noses were touching, now. George’s breath smelt of berries.

One morsel of sunlight is all it needs.

Dream was on his feet before he realized what was happening. “Dream?” George squeaked. There was fear etched into his flushed face. Dream stepped on a pastry, slipped, and only barely managed to catch himself on the nearby table. His heart was hammering in his chest. *No, no. Not again.*

Like a coward, he ran. He ran all the way back to their room, slamming the door of the guest bedroom behind him. He collapsed against the door, panting, and pulled his knees to his chest.

I can’t go through this again. I can’t do this again.

Memories of George flashed behind his eyelids. George, in his regalia, staring out the window of the carriage; George, pale and bloody, treating him like a friend on the floor of Bad’s cottage; George, wrapped in firelight, caressing his wounds into oblivion.

George, young and gangly, kneeling by his bedside, wiping blood off Dream's mangled face.

I'd barely been strong enough to shut you out that day. How dare you force your way back in?

George returned some time later, silent. He did not knock, did not speak. He put out the fire himself. When he crawled into bed, Dream swore he heard his breath hitch. All the while Dream remained curled against his door, paralyzed.

Hours later, when the sun begun to rise, he found sleep.

Chapter End Notes

don't hmu just realized nothing I create in this au will ever top @kreativeboom's masked knight au on insta 🥺

sorry for the long wait! I had writer's block this week bc I'm so nervous abt writing good romance and my monkey brain is convinced that all my lore must be deep and make sense and the relationships must be super complex and then I get overwhelmed and read Unspoken Rules again

but the clout whore is BACK AND IM BRINGING THE PAIN

lemme know what y'all think >:)

-Ophelia

Burn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream was in a forest. He did not know how he got there, but the ice-hardened ground digging into his bare feet was a feeling he knew all too well. The wind around him screamed, slicing at his ears with frigid teeth. He was cold, colder than he'd ever been before; his skin burnt, his lips felt like they were made of leather, and when he looked down at his hands he saw there was blackness creeping up his fingertips in twisting little vines. He opened his mouth and tried to scream, but the noise that came out was strangled and quiet.

Where am I?

A river emerged from the shadows of the world around him, gleaming and white. Dream fell to his knees and crawled for it, forcing his eyes open as a great weight settled on his back. Sleep, his mind told him. Close your eyes and rest, just for a moment.

"No!" Dream said aloud. There was no resting in the forest, not in weather like this. He'd seen too many children curl up into balls and slip away into nothing, their spirits carried away on the bitter breeze. The weight on his back grew heavier. Groaning, Dream dragged himself to the river's edge and looked down.

The face reflecting back at his was not his own. His hair was darker, his chin a little less pointy. There was no trace of his awful scars. He was younger, smaller, in tattered nightclothes that were not his own.

With one frozen hand, Dream reached up and traced his finger along the curved ram's horn that circled around his ear.

"Dream!"

Someone grabbed him, pulling him to their chest. Dream's face erupted into agony. Phantom hands pulled at his every limb, leaving handprints scorched black into his flesh. He screamed with all his might but was unable to produce more than a low moan that echoed in his ears, becoming the low, raspy breathing of a wither skeleton.

"Dream!"

A face leaned in through the chaos and for a moment, Dream's nightmare came to a screeching halt.

"I'm here, Dream."

George had him in his arms, half-curved against his chest. He raised a hand to Dream's cheek and cupped it gently, unbothered by the blood that leaked through his fingertips. He was the George of now, of yesterday, but the voice that whispered into Dream's ear was the voice of a young teenager.

"You're okay, Dream. I've got you."

George. Dream reached for him. I'm sorry. I was a coward. His pain was swept away by the glittering river. I'm here. I'm here, now. For you. He pulled their foreheads together and breathed

in the warmth of his breath. His hand curled around the back of George's head and pulled him close and —

Dream started awake, coughing on nothing. His arms felt empty. The soft part of his cheek below his eye, where the scar was thickest, burned with a phantom itch.

By the time he mustered enough courage to leave his bedroom, George was already gone.

~

The first thing Tubbo did upon seeing Dream was reach for him with both arms and yank him into the tightest hug he'd ever experienced.

"I knew you guys would find me," he murmured, pressing his face into the crook of Dream's shoulder and shifting his mask sideways. "You guys are the best."

His arms were bandaged all the way to his fingers and his broken horn had been shaved down and rounded into a soft point. There were bandages on his ears, too. The shadow of his experience was present in the bags beneath his eyes and the cracks in his lips that had not yet healed, but he was smiling, and that fact lifted a weight off Dream's chest.

Across the room from them, in the shadow of a shuttered window, Prince Tommy napped in George's lap.

"He came to see me last night and hasn't left since," Tubbo said. "He had a bad fight with his dad, you know."

"George told me," Dream nodded. "But we'll help Tommy get everything figured out with his dad. I think he just needs a little time to rest."

As if on cue, Tommy shuddered in his sleep, sucking in a breath of air as if choking. George, his eyes trained on the closed window, carded one hand through Tommy's messy hair and placed the other one on his wing, moving his hand in long, comforting circles. Dream knew he could tell he was staring, but his gaze did not budge.

"I want my dad," Tubbo whispered. Dream turned, expecting him to say more, but found the child staring past him blankly. After a long moment, Tubbo leaned forward and pressed his face into his bandaged hands. "I feel sick."

Dream placed a hand on his shoulder and tried to rub at it comfortingly, but the child was so thin that his fingers only felt bone. Cursing inwardly, Dream twisted his torso and cocked a thumb back at his axes.

"Want another look? I may be nice and let you touch them, too."

Tubbo's eyes brightened hesitantly. "Yeah! Tommy will be so jealous."

Dream was halfway through regaling the origin story of his axes' many enchantments when he realized he was being watched. When Tubbo was busy inspecting the swirled patterns on one of the blades, he spared a glance sideways, quick enough as to not be noticed.

Tommy was still sound asleep, brow furrowed. George, however, was looking straight at him. His face was cool, neutral, kingly — he was studying him, analyzing his movements. This was the George Dream was used to. The one he'd worked alongside his entire life.

Familiar. That's what he was. But now the word felt sour on Dream's tongue.

Perhaps they'd gotten too careless, toed a line they shouldn't have. George was a king, Dream was a knight, and that's all they'd ever be.

Tubbo butted Dream's arm with his head. "Tell me more."

You should be grilling Phil for information right now. I should be on my feet, axe in hand, ready to slice the smug heads off the Eretians, not sitting on my ass telling a prince a story. We need to do something for these poor kids.

Dream watched Tommy's wing flutter in his sleep and chuckled. "Fine, but only because I want you to have lots of stories to tell Tommy when he wakes up."

The brightness of Tubbo's grin calmed his frazzled mind. "You're so awesome."

~

He and George stayed in the infirmary wing until lunch, keeping both boys occupied without passing as much as a single word between them. By the time servants came in with covered trays of sandwiches, Dream felt like he was about to explode. He needed information, an update, *something* to keep his mind off the burning beacon George's presence had become over the last couple hours. But Phil didn't come visit, and neither did Sapnap. Somehow, the latter of those two facts was more of a relief than a worry. Sapnap didn't know what had gone down between he and George the night before. If he waltzed in, he'd expect them all to be friends, and neither George nor Dream himself were good enough actors to pretend like the night before hadn't happened.

I don't even know what the fuck happened. Dream let his head fall against the wall and closed his eyes. Beside him, Tubbo slept soundly, curled around one of Dream's arms as if he were a comfort animal. *I was so close to you. You wanted to be close to me.*

That thought sent an electric jolt through his body. George had smiled that night, giggled that night. He'd been the one to lean in and nearly dust their lips together. For the first time ever, it was him who crossed that unspoken boundary. *What would have happened if I hadn't ran away?*

The weed in his chest bloomed a little more, pulled upwards by the memory. *Fuck off,* he wanted to tell it, but the horrible part of his brain wanted to tip his head to the sky and sing. *I cut that part of me out long ago. It's not coming back. It's better this way.*

That was a downright lie, and Dream knew it. He'd never been able to get rid of that part of him. That's why he'd shut himself away in the first place, killing any potential friendship with rudeness and scathing (though feigned, but George didn't need to know that) apathy.

Going back to square one was something Dream would not risk.

"Boys?"

It was Phil, stony-faced and stiff. He was dressed in full regalia, complete with the glittering decorative trident he bounced between both hands. Tommy jerked awake, eyes wide, and practically threw himself against the far wall. "Go away! Go away!"

Phil's mouth tightened. "I just want to see Prince George, my boy, I—"

Tommy's wings began to flap erratically and he fell to his knees, skittering beneath Tubbo's bed until only his eyes were visible beneath the shadows. "Get out! I don't want to see you!"

Phil tore his eyes away and looked to the both of them pleadingly. “May I see you two outside?” He asked.

Dream nodded quickly, placing a gentle hand on Tubbo’s knee as he sat up groggily, eyes flicking between him and Phil in distress. Phil’s wide eyes warmed at the sight of him. “Tubbo, I’m glad you’re awake—“

“GO!” Tommy barked. The force in his voice drove all three of them out into the hall, staring at one another awkwardly. In the momentary chaos, George fell against Dream’s side, grabbing onto his tunic as Phil hurried them through the door and shut it behind him. Just as Dream processed the warmth of his hands against his flesh, George pulled himself away and stood at arms’ length, stiff as a board.

If Phil picked up on the awkwardness between them, he didn’t show it. He continued to bounce the trident between his hands, obviously troubled. “There’s my boy,” he said quietly. “Is he well? What about Tubbo?”

“They’re as fine as they can be in their situations,” George replied immediately. “They both seem to be sleeping rather easily, though that may be due to shock. I’m not sure Tubbo’s processed what’s happened yet.”

Phil averted his gaze, running his tongue over his teeth. “The last patrol of knights are finally returning soon. They went off-mission after finding out that Tubbo had been found safe and were briefly captured at the Manburg castle before being released. I’d like you two to be there when they come tell us their findings.”

“I’d have to return to my room and get properly dressed,” George said. “But we’d be happy to be there.”

“Good. Full regalia, please. I’ve had a red cape and one of my older crowns delivered to your room. They should work as replacements for your own.” Phil rolled his shoulders back and his wings shuddered as if he were cold. “Depending on the Eretians’ willingness to release King Schlatt, we may need to be ready to travel to a meeting spot at a moment’s notice for negotiations. I’d be happy to get this all over with as soon as possible and return that poor boy to his father’s side.”

Dream’s fingers itched to hold his axes. He craved a battle, to do what he’d been trained for all these years. *To put those bastards in the ground for what they did to Tubbo and George.*

He realized both Phil and George were looking at him and nodded hurriedly. “Yes,” he forced out, wincing internally as George’s eyes flickered with annoyance.

Phil nodded. “I’ll see you two in my chancery, then. The knights are expected to return within the next quarter of an hour.”

With one last glance at the infirmary door, Phil bowed to the both of them and strode off in the other direction, trident clinking in pace with his steps. When Dream turned around, George was already halfway down the hall, fiddling with one of the buttons on his sleeves. He walked through a stray patch of sunlight and the side of his face and hair was set aglow, practically shining.

It was so easy to find him beautiful. So painfully easy.

I cannot lose what I have with you. Dream straightened his shoulders and felt himself slip back into his persona. It fit like a worn-out glove, slightly too thin to keep him warm. *I’d rather have this than suffer through you realizing how shit of a partner I’d be. It’s better this way.*

George, halfway up the staircase, turned and looked at him blankly. “Are you coming?”

The upcoming distraction felt like a weight off his chest. *Duty calls.*

~

When Dream wanted a distraction, this was *not* what he meant.

The knights returned, alright. They returned stripped of their armour and weapons, carrying only their scraps of food and water canteens. They returned blank-faced, skittish, and troubled, muttering amongst themselves as they handed their exhausted horses to the stablehands. Out of the twelve that returned, only three met them in Phil’s chancery. Out of the three, only one of them had the bravery to tell them what they’d found.

“King Schlatt is dead.”

Phil’s face seemed to lose all colour. “What?”

“King Schlatt,” the weary knight repeated, “He’s dead, your Majesty.”

“How do you know?”

“I was there in the prison with him, your Majesty.” The knight’s rust-coloured wings pulled in against him as he shuddered. “They’d made him sick. I don’t know how, but he knew he was dying, your Majesty. I made sure to tell him his boy had made it out alive and was safe.”

Phil practically fell backwards into his chair, jaw tight. “Sick?” He said, voice at a deadly calm.

The poor knight turned to his two silent comrades, eyes wide, but they remained still as statues against the wall. All three of them looked positively drained, terrified under the gazes of two kings in full regalia. “I don’t know, your Majesty,” he stammered. “His breath smelt of sulfur and he was coughing up blood the whole time I was down there with him. He died a couple hours before Eretians let us go. I did my best to tell him his Aether Rights and—“

Phil slammed his fist down onto his desk, causing all three knights to jolt. “Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Those bastards.”

George’s eyes were wide with terror. “Tubbo...”

“I will see to it that all twelve of you receive the care you deserve. Thank you, my friends.” Phil’s voice seemed devoid of all emotion. He waved a single hand in the air. “You three are dismissed. Please head to the second infirmary wing immediately.”

The knights scurried off without another word, too frazzled to even bow as they left. Once they were out of sight, Phil buried his face in his hands and pulled at the hair framing his face. George leaned back in his chair, mouth moving without sound. The small golden crown nestled in his hair fell askew, tipping over his forehead. Dream’s own knees felt like they were made of pudding.

King Schlatt was dead. Truly, undeniably dead. Had they not saved Tubbo, Manburg’s entire royal bloodline would be dead as well, slaughtered in one merciless swoop. An invasion was one thing, but to kill a king? That was something that could not be reversed, could not be made better with the reluctant trade of a sea port or diamond mine.

The Eretians wanted far more than Phil and George been prepared for, and Schlatt had paid the price for them.

“What do we do next?” George asked incredulously. “The Eretians murdered King Schlatt!”

“Shh!” Phil hissed. He’d gone white as a sheet. “Do you want a servant to hear? Keep your voice down.”

“Phil! Is that what matters right now?” George took his crown off and buried his fingers in his hair. “Aether Almighty, how are we supposed to tell Tubbo?”

Phil rose, sending a spike of panic down Dream’s spine. His wings were outstretched, stiff as boards. He breathed once, twice, then his whole body seemed to relax. “I’ll tell Tubbo myself, George. Don’t worry.”

“But — and what about—“ George started.

“Tomorrow, we ready our forces to invade Manburg. After all, we hold its rightful king.” Phil’s voice was gentle, strikingly different from moments before. “Tonight, our priority is Tubbo. Like it or not, King Schlatt doesn’t need us anymore. He is safe now.”

Tubbo. Dream felt the choking grip of grief grab him in a vice hold. *That poor child. He’s so little.*

George had been expecting his father’s death when it had finally happened. After months of watching him slowly wither away, it was a near mercy to see him go. George himself had been newly nineteen, thin and lithe as always but no longer lanky. He was an adult, both in mind and in body.

That hadn’t spared him from an ounce of grief. Not a single one.

“You two may return to your rooms if you’d like,” Phil said softly. “I wouldn’t blame you for not wanting to be there when I bear the bad news.”

“You’re doing it already?” George said, rising to his feet. His hands were shaking. “I want to come, I do, but—“ He let loose a shaky breath— “Just give me a moment. Please.”

“It’s no use delaying the inevitable,” Phil said. “Take a moment to recompose. Allow me to inform Tubbo myself and then meet us in the infirmary.”

His tone was stern but bore no sharpness, his orders simple and clear. *This is a father’s voice, not a king’s.* George grimaced and inhaled sharply, but sunk back into his seat nonetheless. Phil nodded slowly. “I know this is hard for you, George. I will not stop you from comforting Tubbo in his time of need, but I can’t in good conscience allow you to be there when I tell him the news.”

“I understand,” George whispered stiffly. “Go now. I’ll be okay.”

Phil turned his eyes to Dream. *Take care of him,* his gaze said. Then he turned to the door, smoothed his robes, and walked out with his hands folded in front of him. For a man with the weight of everyone’s grief upon his shoulders, his steps were light, steady, and calm.

That poor boy’s world is crumbling today. Dream watched George stare at the discarded crown with blazing eyes and fought the fleeting urge to move closer, to press his trembling fingers between his own palms and hold them until they steadied once more. George needed a knight, not a friend. He needed someone to stand beside him as king and protect him from harm.

Perhaps that was the worst part. Dream couldn’t protect him from this kind of harm, no matter how hard he tried. He couldn’t protect Tubbo, either. He could barely protect himself.

George stifled a sob as he finally rose to his feet once more after a couple minutes of pained silence. Dream pretended not to hear it.

“Let’s go,” he said, voice wavering. “Tubbo will need us.”

Dream only nodded silently.

~

They found Tommy first, curled in one of the stairwell windows. One of his hands was bandaged. “Hello,” he murmured as they passed, eyes trained on the figures milling about in the sunny courtyard below.

“Have you seen Tubbo recently?” George asked. He felt like there were vines growing up his throat, catching his words as he tried to speak. Thankfully, his voice stayed steady.

Tommy shook his head. “I left after my dad came in to get you guys. Tubbo kept trying to get me to talk to him and shit so I got mad and left.”

George pursed his lips. *Oh Gods. He doesn’t know.* “And you haven’t heard the news?”

Tommy stiffened and turned his head to look at him, eyes wide. “What news?”

Dream spoke before he was forced to answer. “You should come with us, Tommy.”

George took a step ahead, desperate to run. *I can’t do this. I can’t do this.* Tommy jumped to his feet and grabbed onto Dream’s sleeve, face white as a sheet. “What news?” He repeated as they began walking again. “What news, Dream? What happened?”

“Tubbo’s father has passed.” The words seemed as unpleasant for Dream to speak as they were for George to think. Tommy’s face fell. “Your dad is giving him the news now.”

“What? I—” Tommy took a step forward, stumbled, then covered his mouth with his hands. “What the fuck! Holy shit! I have to see him!”

He blew past George, down the rest of the stairs, and was gone in the blink of an eye. George allowed himself to let out a breath and forced his tightening throat to relax. There was a pit in his stomach now, hot and roiling and painful. Every fibre of his being wanted to hide, to run, to be anywhere else.

“Thank you.”

George’s voice came out barely above a whisper. Any louder, and he felt he would shatter. “Huh?” Dream said.

“Thank you,” he said again. He turned his head slightly, allowing himself to see the shape of Dream’s figure out of the corner of his eye. “I couldn’t tell Tommy myself.”

“Oh.” Dream swallowed. “Don’t mention it.”

They didn’t speak again down the rest of the stairwell, nor did they speak as they walked the long hall. When the first broken wail hit their ears and stole the air from their lungs, George uttered a single word.

“*Gods.*”

Tommy stood outside the infirmary doors, leaned up against the wall just out of sight. As they neared, he practically threw himself into George's arms. "It's bad," he whimpered. "It's bad — Tubbo, he—"

Another choked sob from within the infirmary hit them like a blade, forcing Tommy into silence as he dissolved into silent tears. Gods, help them all. Tubbo was crying so hard he was coughing, gasping for air George knew wouldn't come.

That had been the worst part; crying myself to breathlessness and gasping for air I couldn't find. I thought I was going to die. Once, I dragged myself to my door and just laid there, praying you'd hear me. You didn't.

Phil emerged from the darkness, exhaustion falling off him in waves. "Tommy," he said, hands raising momentarily as if welcoming him for a hug before falling again. "Go be with him."

Tommy shook his head wordlessly. Phil frowned. "I won't come in if you don't want me there."

"That's not it." Tommy pulled his wings in around himself. "I can't help him."

"Sometimes, when the pain is that bad," Phil said softly, "All you can do is be there for him."

Memories in George's mind began to play in muted colours. *"I'm here, Dream. I'm here. You're okay."*

"I can't see! I can't see!"

Dream let out a soft sigh. His head turned ever so slightly. George knew he was looking at him.

"It's okay, Dream. You saved my life. It's okay."

Dream's hands grappled for him blindly. George caught one of them as it brushed his face and held it tightly in both of his. Around them, medics and stablehands rushed about in colourless blurs. "I've got you, Dream. I've got you."

There was blood on George's hands, on his tunic and pants. One of his arms was numb. He did not care.

"You're going to be okay."

"Go be with him. Sit in silence if you need. Let him grieve."

"Take this."

Dream opened a fluttering, bloodstained eye. "They told me I couldn't have any more."

George placed the small pill in one of Dream's palms and wiped a glob of blackened blood out of the corner of his eye. "This one is supposed to be for me, but I'm not in too much pain. It will help you sleep."

Dream's voice was soft and weary. "Thank you, George."

Tommy disappeared into the darkness of the infirmary, where Tubbo's sobs continued steadily as though it were some sort of awful melody. George grabbed Dream's sleeve, unable to stop himself. His knees felt weak. "Take me to my room," he said, his voice strangled. "Please. I can't do this."

Sadness shone in Phil's grey eyes. "I'll stay with the boys. They'll be alright, I promise."

I haven't missed you this much since the morning after they'd buried you.

"Thank you, Phil," Dream replied. He placed a gentle hand on the small of George's back. "Let's go."

George's throat had closed. He couldn't speak, couldn't breathe, could barely *move* for fear of all the grief and anguish roaring in his throat bursting forth and swallowing him whole. Dream nudged him once, twice. "Your Highness?" His voice was warm and alive and safe. George wanted to bury himself in that safety.

I'd give anything to see you again, Dad.

"I'll leave you to your privacy," said Phil. He reached forward and grabbed George's trembling hand. "Sleep, George. I will update you in the morning. For now, this situation is in my hands and my hands only. You may rest."

George watched him as he slipped into Tubbo's bedroom, paralyzed by the pain in his chest. Part of him wanted to follow him, to curl up and become the lost, grieving teenager he'd once been just to feel the warmth of a father's comfort again. His knees buckled, but Dream caught him as he fell. "Come on," he said, lifting him into his arms. "We all need sleep."

"That poor child," George whispered into Dream's shoulder. "He's only twelve. He's so little."

The gentle sway of Dream's footsteps rocked him into a trance as they ascended the stairwell. George felt another kind of pain bloom in his chest — humiliation. Deep, paralyzing humiliation. *I feel so stupid right now.*

They entered his room, Dream kicking the door behind them closed. He took a step towards George's bed but George forced himself to kick his legs out of Dream's grip and stand on his own. His legs burned with the effort of keeping himself upright but seeing Dream stiffen as he walked to his bed took the edge off the embarrassment boiling in his bloodstream. Using the last of his energy, George kicked off his boots and dragged himself into his bed.

The bed creaked as Dream sat down beside him. He rested a warm hand on George's side. "I don't need your pity," George whispered.

"I don't pity you," Dream replied. His voice made George want to slap him and kiss him all at once.

"I'm no fool, Dream." George wanted to shake Dream's hand off of him but couldn't bring himself to do it. *Pathetic*. "You made yourself clear last night. There's no use trying to be noble about it."

"I'm not being noble." Dream's hand tightened on his side. "I want to be here."

I hate you for how much I want you to hold me right now. George buried his face in his pillow as a sob ripped free. *I hate you for making me vulnerable.* "Leave me be. The last thing I need right now is you making me feel worse."

"I'm not leaving," Dream said stubbornly. "You need me here."

"What I *need* right now is for you to be honest with me." George forced himself into a sitting position, meeting Dream eye-to-eye, and pulled his mask off before he could protest. "Whether I like it or not, you are aware of my feelings. Do you return them or not?"

Dream's face stilled, dragging George's heart to a halt along with it. *Don't leave me alone*, one

part of his brain wanted to scream. *I will not chase you*, another part said. *I am a king. I am brought to my knees by nobody.*

“I don’t.”

There it was, plain and simple. George gritted his teeth. “Then it’s best for both of us if you leave.”

Dream’s eyes fell, closing as he breathed in several long breaths. “George,” he started.

“I’m not punishing you.” George turned away, laying his head on the pillow as agony crawled up his throat. “I’m giving you freedom. Go see Sapnap.”

“I don’t *want* to see Sapnap.” Dream grabbed his mask from the bed and stood up. George refused to let himself relish in his words. “I’m supposed to protect you.”

George laughed humourlessly. “Go protect the orphaned child we left downstairs because I cannot get a handle on my own feelings.”

“George!”

For the first time since the knights had returned, George felt peaceful. White-hot flames licked at the inside of his ribcage, feasting on the charred remains of his organs. He felt empty, burnt out to nothing. *Apathy has never felt so blissful.* “Dream.”

“You mean more to me than anyone else in the world. I’m *your* knight, I’m—“

“Don’t say things like that.” George smiled and wiped at a tear dribbling down his chin. “Not now. Please.”

Dream deflated, pain flickering in his eyes. George moved onto his back and raised one of his hands and Dream took it immediately, pressing the back of his palm to his lips.

It should feel nice to see you care. All George wanted to do was sleep. *But instead all it does is hurt me more.* “I’ll be okay, Dream. I just need to rest.”

“I’ll be outside.” Dream slipped his mask back on. “If you need anything, come and get me.”

I need so many things you can’t give me. I need my dad, my kingdom. I need you to need me back.

George nodded. “I will. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, your Highness.”

~

Dream leaned his head on the wall, closing his eyes until the lump in his throat had disappeared.

It’s better this way.

Chapter End Notes

imagine getting friendzoned during a ptsd attack abt ur dead dad lol L

this chapter was hard as hell to write but I love pain so it was also incredibly fun

y'all wanted these boys to communicate???? HAHAHAHAH no bitch that would be too easy

edit: holy shit y'all's comments getting mad at Dream are fucking hilarious I love every single one of you /g

-Ophelia

Wounds That Sting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream woke to a gentle yet firm poke in the side. Though it was barely dawn, the knights' quarters were bustling with noise and movement. Half-dressed knights moved about each other with furrowed brows and sharp voices, tossing apples and chunks of bread to one another as they slipped tunics on and picked stray feathers from their wings. "You're up!" One knight said as he passed by, wiping at his freckled face with a wet towel. He chucked a small apple into Dream's lap and chuckled. "I can't believe you slept with that mask on, dude. That thing's fucking terrifying."

He laughed as he was pulled away by a chattering friend, disappearing into the sea of muscled arms and glinting armour. Dream leaned back with a sigh, only noticing the movement beside him as a figure encroached on his peripherals and flicked the corner of his mask.

"Today's the day," Sapnap said with a yawn, scratching at the shadow of facial hair beneath his chin. "We finally get to beat the shit out of some Eretians."

Dream picked the apple up off his lap and inspected it. It was soft— he only liked crunchy apples. "Woohoo," he said blankly, tossing it into Sapnap's eager hands. "Great."

"Come on, dude! Isn't this what we've been waiting for? We've been sitting on our asses here for weeks!" Sapnap exclaimed. "If we take Manburg back, then getting our kingdom back will be a piece of cake!"

We haven't got a clue what the hell we're running into. Dream swung his legs over the side of his bed and stood. His stiff back cracked loud enough to make Sapnap choke on a mouthful of apple. "Something feels off. I wish we had more time to plan."

"Apparently forces must mobilize immediately if an allied king is killed and reclaim the invaded territory." A bustling knight ran by and dropped Sapnap's vest into his lap. "The longer we wait, the longer the Eretians have time to settle in and mess shit up."

"Still. I don't like it," Dream grumbled. He threw on his clothes as quickly as he could, ignoring Sapnap's squawks of protest for him to slow down, and darted his way out of the knights' quarters with Sapnap at his heels. As early as it was, the whole castle was unusually alive and buzzing with nervous energy. As they rounded the staircase, two figures appeared from the opposite hall — Prince Technoblade, clad in gleaming netherite armour, and Prince Tommy's half-enderman friend, somehow looking excited and as though he'd rather be anywhere else at the same time.

"Dream!" Technoblade called. "Are you on your way to see my dad?"

Dream nodded. "He's awake?"

"He's in a meeting with King George. I'm surprised you're not there already," Technoblade chuckled. "Give him this—" he handed Dream a small scroll stamped with royal blue wax— "It's a message from some soldier patrols we sent up north to keep an eye on the pillager towns. They'll be making sure all the portals stay open for us."

Dream bowed his head respectfully. "I'll make sure this gets to him. Thank you."

"No problem." Technoblade clicked his fingers. "Ranboo, let's go."

The half-enderman boy waved at them shyly as they walked away, his thin tail whipping side to side. Once he was out of earshot, Sapnap snorted quietly. “How much would you have to drink to fuck an enderman?”

Dream whacked him with the scroll. “This is why I don’t bring you places with me,” he muttered.

Sapnap crinkled his nose as they began walking again, slowing his pace just enough to slip from Dream’s vision. Dream heard the familiar sound of him unsheathing a knife from his vest and internally sighed. *Here we go.*

“Something’s up with you.”

Dream paused and turned his head to look back. Sapnap had a small knife between his fingers and was toying with it as if it were no more than a piece of string. His dark eyebrows were furrowed, and as he huffed through his nose at Dream’s unenthused stare he rolled his shoulders back and leaned his weight on one leg. Dream felt discomfort climb up his throat; Detective Sapnap was one of his least favourite Sapnaps. Questions always led to complication.

“We need to get to this meeting,” Dream said sternly, though Sapnap only rolled his eyes. “Dude! I’m serious!”

“You’re all fucked up about King George again!” Sapnap pointed the small dagger at him and scowled. “What happened this time?”

Am I really that obvious? Dream slid a hand beneath his mask and rubbed at his eyes until stars swam in his vision. “King George and I are on delicate terms right now. I’d appreciate if you stayed out of it.”

“Fuck. What did you do?” Sapnap said.

“Nothing!” Dream replied shrilly. Gods almighty, he hated questions. “We had a very healthy discussion about our boundaries.”

Sapnap’s face morphed into a mix of astonishment, embarrassment, and hurt. “Dude, did he reject you?” He said softly.

I think that would have hurt less if that was what happened. Dream groaned into his hands. “No, dickhead. It’s him who’s complicated.”

Unable to force any more out, Dream whirled around on his heel and stalked off down the hall. He didn’t realize how tightly he was gripping Technoblade’s scroll until he felt the wax seal begin to crumble beneath his thumb. *Pull yourself together*, he ordered himself, but his brain was already screaming. Sapnap knew, now. He *knew*.

A shiver ran down Dream’s spine. *This is all coming too close to the surface for comfort. Keep your big mouth shut next time, Idiot. You’re fucked if anyone finds out.*

But as far as Sapnap knew, Dream didn’t return George’s feelings. As far as Sapnap knew, Dream’s feelings towards his king were nothing — and had always *been* nothing — but strictly friendly. He had at least something to hide behind if Sapnap came sniffing around again.

Sapnap didn’t say anything until they’d reached the doors of King Phil’s chancery. “You’re stupid as fuck for rejecting King George.” His voice was no more than a humorous mutter. “You could have gotten me so much free shit from him. Kings make great sugar daddies.”

Dream's fingers tightened on the plated gold handle. It was cool and soft beneath his fingers.

Sometimes, I think I almost deserve to strangle you.

~

"You should eat."

George turned. Dream stood behind him, arms crossed. "Hm?"

"You and Phil decided that we'd leave at dawn. That's pretty soon," Dream said. "You should eat before we go."

George turned back to the window and watched the ant-sized lines of mounted soldiers gathering in the courtyard. "I ate before the meeting."

That was a lie. He'd barely been able to stomach the couple biscuits Phil had forced on him hours before. His stomach felt as if filled with cotton balls, empty and full at the same time.

Dream's presence made his body want to light those cotton balls on fire and burn him out all over again. Part of George wanted that. Anything would feel better than the gnawing dread that had settled over every inch of his body. His fingers drifted to his bandaged hand and traced mindless circles over the lines of gauze.

"You look pale. I didn't even see you touch your tea the entire time."

Dream's voice was gentle, but the awkwardness between them stripped his words bare of any comfort they may have given. George sighed, turning his eyes back to the window. *I feel like I'm standing here naked in front of you.* "A lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours, Dream. I can't say I'm at my best."

They hadn't talked since the night before. Aether Above, they hadn't even *seen* each other. George had gone over what it would be like to see him again in his mind countless times in a feeble attempt to prepare himself, but now that Dream was there, mere inches away with pity rolling off him, the pain George had been fearing had come roaring back in a merciless wave.

"Your Highness, please let me get you something to eat before we leave."

"I have things packed," George said through gritted teeth.

Dream's armour clinked as he shifted uncomfortably. "Your Highness," he started again, "As your knight, I—"

"Quiet!" George snapped. Dream froze. "King Phil has a team of guards that will be protecting us on this mission, therefore *they're* the ones tasked with managing my well-being." Without turning back to look at him, George moved past Dream with as much confidence as he could muster and placed his hand on the chancery door's ornate handle. "Focus on the knights you and Sapnap will be leading and that is it."

He turned the door handle and breathed an internal sigh. *I can do this.*

"What? "

Dream was upon him in the blink of an eye, fists clenched. "You didn't tell me I wouldn't be protecting you on this mission."

“I made it clear you and Sarnap would be leading a patrol along with Phil’s head knight,” George said coolly, pulling the door open with a gentle squeal. “I assumed you would infer from that.”

They walked in uncomfortable silence back to George’s room, Dream hanging at his heels with enough tension radiating off of him to make Prince Wilbur give them a nonplussed glance as he strode by. George’s heart pounded in his ribcage. *What’s his fucking deal?* He thought to himself. Suppressing the urge to pick his already-pitiful nail beds into bloody shreds, George folded his hands in front of him and kept his pace steady.

You can wait to tear my head off, asshole. I have the power to make you wait.

By the time the door to George’s door had clicked shut behind them, Dream looked ready to explode. George sat down on his bed and unclipped his cape, letting it slide to the floor by his feet. A servant had left a set of gleaming netherite armour on a stand by his bedside table, and the light of the rising sun set the armour’s pristine surface alight into an array of violet swirls.

It reminds me of your axes.

“George,” Dream said. “You can’t be serious.”

George set his mouth into a tight line. “I am.”

“I’m the one who’s supposed to protect you! You can’t just throw me aside!”

“I’m using your talents to the best of their abilities to help a mission, Dream. I’m not throwing you aside.” George gritted his teeth. “Stop throwing a tantrum because I’m not letting you get ego boosts off of me anymore.”

“That’s not—” Dream ripped off his mask and slammed it down on the nearby table with enough force to rattle the windows. “You think I’m doing this for *ego boosts* ? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Rage glowed in his eyes but George couldn’t bring himself to care. “It seems so. You lose your goddamned mind every time you can’t come sweep your helpless king off his feet. Is that why you stuck around for so long? You liked feeling like a big man?”

“Fuck you! I devoted my life to keeping you safe!” Dream spat. “You don’t get to fucking punish me over nothing and make me look like the bad guy just because you’re mad at me!”

George opened his mouth but the words crumbled like burning paper in the flames rolling off his tongue. Dream thrust a finger at him, baring his teeth. “Don’t be mad at me because I know what’s best for the relationship we have. You *can’t* —“

“I know you don’t return my feelings, Dream. That’s not the issue here!” George cried. “You need to get the fuck over yourself and realizing you’re not the only person able to keep me safe!”

“You just said I was doing this for fucking ego boosts!”

“I think you’re being possessive over my safety for ego boosts!”

“That’s bullshit and you know it!” Dream’s voice had risen to a furious shout. “*I know* you know it! The only reason you even have feelings for me is because I was the one to swoop in and save you when you needed it!”

“That’s not true!” George hissed. “I am not that shallow!”

“You know that’s all I’m good for! I’m a service, your Highness!” Dream threw his hands up in the air and a small sob ripped free from his throat. “*That’s* what you fell in love with. Not me!”

“Leave.” George pointed to the door. “Leave, now.”

Something in Dream’s expression seemed to shatter. “Leave!” George repeated, loud enough to make him wince. Slowly, with shaking hands, he picked his mask up off the table and slipped it on. George forced himself to swallow the lump rising in his throat. “I will not sit here and have you question my character. Get out of my sight.”

Dream drew in a shuddering breath. “George, I—“

“And if I die during this mission because you weren’t there to save me,” George continued in a whisper. “Then feel free to gloat. You’d deserve it.”

“If I die,” Dream breathed after a moment. “Then hire Sapnap as your new guard. All the other knights are stupid.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you.”

George turned back to his set of armour, not daring to even breathe until the sound of Dream’s steps had faded down the hall. A horrible sense of finality clawed up his back and he was on his knees before he knew it, choking into his hands. *It’s over. We’re over.*

George leaned his forehead on the chestplate before him and chuckled to himself, low and raw and resigned. *You fucked this up yourself, Georgie. Now you’ve lost him for good.*

Perhaps it was better that way.

(And perhaps George could actually convince himself of that.)

~

The moment Dream stepped into the courtyard, he heard a voice cry out from above him. “Dream!”

A figure landed beside him in a silvery-green blur, startling Dream into dropping one of his axes. Dream gritted his teeth and scowled. “What?”

He whipped around to face an armoured young man with the brightest green wings he’d ever seen. Chuckling nervously, the young man said, “I’m King Phil’s head knight, Sam. Sapnap’s been looking for you.”

Dream breathed a sigh and swallowed the irritation bubbling in his throat. “Tell him I’m coming. I just had to finish something.”

Sam nodded. He reminded Dream of the knights from back home — bulky, tall, friendly as one of the field horses. The young trainees Dream had helped train over the years would have latched on to someone like Sam immediately.

They’d never liked Dream, and Dream never blamed them.

“We’ll be at the front waiting for you.” Sam pointed a finger past the assembling lines of knights. “The formation is our guys up front, then medics, then the small cannons and archers, the kings and the specialty patrol, then more small cannons to protect the back. I’ve already got some guys

flying up ahead to check for traps.”

Dream felt a stab of guilt. “You guys really have all this planned out. I’m sorry I couldn’t have done more to help.”

“Don’t mention it!” Sam said with a smile. His green wings glimmered almost iridescently in the sunrise. “Sapnap mentioned you had things to take care of with King George. I understand completely.”

Thank you, Sapnap. Dream shuddered away the memory of what had happened back in George’s room. *I definitely took care of what I had to take care of.*

“Alright, I’ll see you there!” Sam said, then pushed off into the sky with a single flap of his wings. Stretching his shoulders, Dream fixed his mask and began moving past the knights and mounted cannons as what seemed like every personnel in the castle prepared to leave. Some knights waved as he passed, while some merely glanced at him and turned away, muttering in low murmurs. *Now this feels like normal.* A fleeting wave of peace rushed over him. A guard, a knight, a fighter — *that’s* who he was supposed to be. Not a lapdog to a king.

Sapnap, mounted on the same grey horse he’d ridden on their rescue mission, tossed him the reins to a speckled brown mare as he darted up to the front of the patrol. “Her name’s Patches,” he said, leaning back on his saddle as Dream hefted himself up onto his horse’s back. “Get acquainted with her while we wait. A messenger will sound a horn when the kings are ready.”

“Sounds good.” Dream kicked the mare into action and trotted a lazy circle around Sapnap and his horse, leaning out of the way with a laugh as Sapnap reached to punch him on the arm. Sam, perched atop a monstrous draft horse, gave them both a low chuckle. Dream would have probably found him to be irritating if he weren’t so charming. Perhaps it was the wings. “You two are in good moods. Excited for a battle?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Dream stretched his arms. “I want to give those assholes a piece of my mind for what they did to Tubbo.”

“You and I are on the same page. I hate it when people fuck with kids,” Sam said with a frown. “I have a soft spot for Prince Tommy. He used to come to me for combat lessons when he needed to unwind.”

Sapnap let out a piercing cackle. “*You’re* the one who taught him how to punch? You’ve created a monster! You should have seen him nearly break Dream’s nose a week or so ago.”

Sam’s eyes widened, and a deep blush spread across his pale cheeks. “Aether Almighty! I’m sorry.”

A phantom ache spread down the bone of Dream’s nose. *I don’t think I’ll ever forgive the little shit for that.* “It’s not your fault. Good on you for trying to help the little monster with his emotions. I’d have thrown him off a mountain by now if I had to play counsellor for him.”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Sam waved a hand dismissively. “He’d have made a fine knight if he wasn’t a prince. He reminds me of you, Dream. There’s a hell of a brain on that kid.”

“I’m no brain,” Dream said, “But thank you. I’ll let your compliment boost my ego insufferably.”

The low drone of a horn drifted through the air. Sam sat up in his saddle and smiled. “That’s our cue, boys. Let’s go take Manburg back.”

Dream rolled his shoulders back and felt the morning's pain fall off him like an unbuttoned cape. *I'm home.*

~

They reached Manburg with no resistance. The portals were open, clear, free of even a single Eretian guard. There were no traps along the river, no snipers hiding in the trees in the forest. Dream couldn't even see a single cannon outside the castle as it crested over the horizon.

Something was terribly wrong.

"This is weird," Dream said, pulling Patches to a halt. Sam raised a hand, signalling for the rest of the patrol to stop. "We should have seen at least some resistance by now."

"They're drawing us into the castle," Sam replied, eyebrows furrowed. "I'd bet on the castle being booby-trapped seven ways to Sunday. We have to keep the patrols small as we go in."

"Small patrols?" Sarnap exclaimed. "We'd have no chance!"

"They want us to go in all at once so they can ambush and take us all down in one swoop. I've studied these bastards." Sam waved the trio of messengers over. "I know their tricks."

He bent down to the trio and pointed at the castle. "High chance the castle is booby-trapped," he said, his voice stern and steady. "We're sending in groups no bigger than ten at a time. Any Manburgian soldiers are to be immediately evacuated and sent outside to the medics. Under no circumstances are the kings to enter the castle."

Once the messengers had flown off to alert the group, Sam turned to Sarnap and Dream. "I can go in first if you guys want."

"No," Dream said immediately. "I don't have a clue how to lead a cannon patrol. Sarnap and I will go in through the second floor windows and scope it out there with some of your dudes."

Sam looked to Sarnap, who merely responded with a thumbs-up. "Sounds good to me," he said. "Keep your horns close by in case anything goes wrong. I'll have backup stay close to the castle just in case."

That had been their first mistake — going into the castle at all. At first glance, it had seemed entirely empty. Every door they bust down led to a room scrubbed clean, void of even the slightest indication of life. Even the walls had been stripped bare of every torch or candle. Down they went into the kitchens, a series of bedrooms, into an ornate office Dream assumed was King Schlatt's chancery, and still they saw or heard nothing.

Their second mistake was entering the basement.

"It smells like sulphur in here," Sarnap said with a wince. Behind them, their patrol murmured in agreement. The scent didn't hit Dream until a moment later, sharp and thick in his nose like acrid smoke. Had the Eretians been killing creepers down there or something?

The castle's basement stretched out in front of them, half-obscured by darkness. Though they hadn't seen a lick of danger since they'd arrived, Dream debated turning them around and leaving. Something wasn't right. Invasions were supposed to be loud and bloody — never, *ever* were they silent.

You didn't hear that man sneaking up on you until he already had a fish knife in your arm. That's

why I had to save you.

A familiar headache bloomed over Dream's eye. He hated silence.

Something clattered in the darkness at the end of the hall, sending their patrol into a momentary frenzy as they all simultaneously unsheathed their weapons. Heart pounding in his chest, Dream called out, "Who's there?"

"Help!" A weak female voice replied. "They have me chained against the wall! I can't move!"

I recognize that voice. Dream caught Sapnap's elbow as he moved to take a step. "Are you injured?" He said into the darkness.

The young woman's voice devolved into hacking coughs. "Please!" She cried hoarsely. "They'll be back soon! You need to help me!"

Dream's eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Tentatively, he took a single step forward, motioning for the rest of the platoon to remain where they were. A blurry figure moved in the darkness, low and slumped close to the floor. *Whose voice is that?* Dream's mind searched desperately for the source of the familiarity.

A knight behind him coughed. The smell of sulphur was strong enough in Dream's nose to make his eyes water.

"Please..." The shape of a hand reached towards him as he moved closer. "Help me, please..."

Why can't I hear her chains?

Dream stopped in his tracks, but it was already too late. The figure before him rose like a rearing python, face obscured by a ghoulish gas mask. Her satyr's legs propelled her forward and she careened into Dream's chest, knocking him backwards. Something light — *glass*, Dream thought in a split second — gleamed in the dim light and came flying towards him.

You. I remember you.

A potion bottle shattered against Dream's temple and engulfed his face in white-hot agony.

You're the bitch that tried to assassinate George.

~

"I see someone."

A single figure stumbled out onto the castle roof, blowing into their horn so hard the sound was little more than an ear-piercing screech. It wasn't Dream, George realized with a jolt of terror, nor was it Sapnap. It was one of Phil's young winged knights, moving erratically from side to side as he fought to rip his armour off. Phil gasped, tightening the hold on his reins. Around them, the soldiers fixing the cannons all froze and watched the lone figure's frenzy with wide eyes. "What's wrong with him?" Phil said.

The young knight threw off his chestplate then practically threw himself into the air, his agonized shrieking becoming louder as he rocketed for them. "They've got gas!" The young man screamed. "They ambushed us! They've got gas!"

He landed in a heap beside one of the cannons, wailing in pain. George slipped off his horse and

ran for him, though Sam reached him before he did. “What gas?” Sam demanded, pulling the forgotten shield off the knight’s spasming arm. “What do you mean?”

“In bottles! Gas in the bottles! It’s so bad you can barely—” The knight’s streaming eyes rolled back in his head and he went limp, trembling. Sam cursed and waved one of the medics over.

Dream and the others are still in there. The thought washed over George like a bucket of icy water. He grabbed Sam’s hand as he went to stand. “We have to save the others! They’re still in there!”

Sam’s eyes were wide, even as a medic slipped between them and began wiping at the young knight’s face with a cloth. “We can’t go back in,” He said. “We haven’t got a clue what’s in there! I’ve never even heard of a gas that smells like sulphur!”

“You have to go in and save them! They could all be dead by now!”

“I can’t send more soldiers in there with whatever the fuck kind of gas that is!” Sam replied sharply. “I’d be sending them to their deaths! We have to help from out here and make it easier for them to get out.”

“That’s bullshit!”

“It’s what’s best!” Sam opened his wings. “I’m going to go inform King Phil. If you want to be of help, go help with the cannons. We’re staying out here and that’s final.”

He was gone in a flurry of green, leaving George to curse beneath his breath and return his focus to the knight at his feet. George sunk to his knees but jolted back immediately, gagging as a familiar scent filled his nose. “The fuck is *that* ?”

The medic furrowed their eyebrows. “Sulphur,” they replied after a moment. “Smells like shit.”

Dad smelled like this when he was dying. King Schlatt did too, apparently. George rose to his feet with as much grace as he could muster and stumbled out of range before hacking up a mouthful of bile. *I had no idea this is what sulphur smelled like. I always assumed it was the decay from Dad’s wound.*

A jolt ran up his spine. The form of his father laying in bed appeared in his mind’s eye, blurry from the passage of time. The iron box he had in his hands was not, though, and nor was the shattered, smoking arrow that lay within it.

“Look at that, Georgie,” his father said. “Arrows like that aren’t easy to find. I’d have probably used it myself if it hadn’t been broken.”

George took the iron box from his father’s hands and noticed the acrid stench that wafted off the arrow immediately. “That’s the Dragon’s Breath, my boy,” his father chuckled weakly. “It’s a poison that End Dragons produce to keep na’er-do-wells away from their eggs. Put a couple drops of that onto an arrow and poison will stick to it forever. You should see what it does to fire!”

George pushed the box back into his father’s hands. “I don’t want to look at it,” he whispered. “I hate what it did to you.”

His father only smiled. “I’ll be fine, George. I always am.”

George blinked. “Dragon’s Breath.”

A nearby soldier gave him a startled look. “Huh?”

“Dragon’s Breath,” George repeated. “That’s what’s in the gas. It’s dragon’s breath.”

A blur of green whizzed over the sky above him, carrying an unlit torch. George jolted. “Sam!”

He pushed himself into a sprint, weaving through the frazzled knights until he reached one of the far cannons. Sam straightened his shoulders upon seeing him. “Your Highness,” he started sternly. “King Phil agrees with—“

“I think I know how we can save them,” George interrupted. He could hear the rush of his own blood in his ears. “But we have to move quickly.”

Sam blinked. “What do you mean?”

“The gas is made of Dragon’s Breath. It’s the poison used to make tipped arrows,” George panted. “I think I know a way to save Dream and the others.”

A spark of hope lit in Sam’s eyes. “Really? What is it?”

George let out a quick breath. *Time to act like your dad, George.*

“We’re going to need a lot of pufferfish.”

Chapter End Notes

@ everyone who was mad at dre last chapter and wanted to kick his butt: I did it for you guys bc im that nice hope y’all liked it <3

im sorry this took so long! I am being weaned off a medication im on and we decided to do it cold turkey bc the meds were making me have tics and let me tell you,,, withdrawal ain’t fun ksfkshdkjf

However Ophie’s Drug Arc is now DONE and im back on my feet ready to cause some pain!!! This chapter also took so long to write bc turns out im actually a god damn fool idiot bitch baby who knows nothing about fighting, battles or strategy!!

follow my tumblr and give me clout OR ELSE @opheliabloo

-Ophelia

A Breath Of Fresh Air

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was one thing that set Dragon's Breath apart from all other poisons: it had no cure. Even the strongest effects of wither poison could be nullified if treated quickly enough with milk, but Dragon's Breath was immune to everything except its own degeneration. By itself, it was a mildly dangerous inconvenience, but when bound to another poison? Downright deadly.

George cried himself sick in his bathroom the day his father had had to explain to him why milk wouldn't stop the poison eating away at the festering wound in his shoulder. Though the medics worked tirelessly upon him, it soon became clear they were more focused on alleviating his pain than prolonging his life. His father never once admitted to knowing the immanency of his own death, even as weight sloughed off him by the day and the smell of rot wafting off him became so putrid that the windows in his room needed to be constantly open.

The medics kept a water-breathing potion on their belts at all time, sipping at it every time they left or entered his father's room.

"They won't be of any use to Dream and the others since they've already inhaled the poison," George said, lighting a spark beneath the last brewing stand in the line. "But it'll save our asses from being blinded and choked out by that stuff when we go in there. That's why the medics were able to care for Dad near the end without getting sick."

Sam nodded intently. Around them, every soldier or medic was bent over a hastily-built brewing stand, dropping nether warts and pufferfish slices into thin-nosed glass bottles. *Bless your brain, Phil*, George thought, watching the man's figure whizz over their heads and disappear behind the cannons. *I'd have never even thought to bring extra potion supplies to a mission.*

A jolt of energy ran through him and he shuddered, hearing his armour clink as he moved. Sam placed a hand on his knee. "We're going to get them out, Your Highness. I think we've got a good chance now."

"We better." George clenched his hand into a fist and felt the stitches on his palm burn. "Or we're blowing this castle to fucking bits with every single Eretian inside."

One of the soldiers behind Sam raised his hand in the air, holding a bottle in his fist. The liquid inside was a deep blue. "Done!"

"Take a mouthful and pass it on!" George replied. "We need as many people getting this stuff into them as quick as possible in case the Eretians start pulling bullshit on us."

He turned back to Sam and held his hand out. "Another bottle, please."

Sam didn't move. George looked up and found him staring past him in the direction of the castle, eyes wide. "Sam?" George repeated, only to have Sam shush him immediately. With his stomach twisting, George turned and saw two figures standing outside the castle doors.

Oh, fuck.

It was the pink-haired woman they'd seen on their mission, dressed in glittering netherite armour that rivalled the splendour of George's own. Beside her, on his knees, was a maskless Dream.

Stripped of his armour, his eyes were shut and swollen, his face wet with tears and half-obsured by the blood cascading down the slash in his hairline. The pink-haired woman scanned the crowd as they all quieted and fell into stillness, not even the barest hint of a smile playing upon her youthful face. "Where is King George?" She called in a booming voice. Two gas masks sat upon her hip. "I have something of his."

She grabbed Dream by a tuft of his hair and yanked him upwards until he was awkwardly half-standing on his trembling legs, gasping for air. George felt his throat tighten. The young woman scanned the crowd again, eyes narrowing. *She's looking for me*, George thought with a burst of terror. *She hasn't seen me yet.*

Something cool was pushed into his hands. "Drink," Sam whispered. "All of it. Now."

George turned back around and saw the blue potion sitting in his hands. He looked back up at Sam, who only nodded encouragingly. George put the glass to his lips, closed his eyes, and downed it in a single mouthful. The last drops had just passed his tongue when the woman's voice rang out again. "I see you, coward. Stand up and talk like a real king."

George tossed the empty bottle into Sam's lap and stood, rolling his shoulders back. The potion didn't burn on his tongue like a healing potion did; it was rather a tingly coolness that seemed to breathe life into his tired body. *Please work*, he internally begged. *I'll be fucked if this gas takes me out.*

He walked in silence, bracing himself as the stench of sulphur grew stronger with every step. Dream, still blind, stirred in distress when George's footsteps were near enough to hear. Aether Above, he'd never looked so horrid before. The gas had flushed his skin to a deep, angry red, and there was a spot of vomit by the corner of his trembling mouth. Smirking, the pink-haired woman tossed George one of the gas masks from her hip. "The castle is guarded," she yelled back at the waiting patrol. "Behave yourselves, and no harm will befall your previous king."

"Nice to see you again," George said flatly, pulling the mask over his mouth. He ached to put it on Dream, to spare his beaten face from any more humiliation, but he had to play king. He had to be strong. *Anything to get my men out of this godforsaken place.*

"How is your hand?" The pink-haired woman replied in a buttery tone. George fought the urge to smack her. *What a slimy bitch.* "I hope you did not cause any lasting harm."

"It's fine. No lasting harm at all."

The pink-haired woman led them down the halls of the castle, humming beneath her breath. They'd released so much gas into the air that it left a permanent purplish foggiess in the air. She kept a hand in Dream's hair, forcing him to stay on his knees and be awkwardly dragged along as they walked. Apart from the occasional hacking cough, Dream remained silent, even as the pink-haired woman threw him to the ground so she could unlock a set of ornate doors. In the moment she turned away, George bent down and touched Dream's cheek. Though the touch was fleeting, barely more than a clumsy swat given how fast it had to be, the effect on Dream was instantaneous. He pushed his face into George's hand in the split second they were touching, forcing his swollen eyes to open as much as they could to look at him. A fresh stab of pain shot through George's chest. *What have they done to you?*

"After you, Your Highness," the pink-haired woman said a sly chuckle. "The Captain will see you now."

George turned away from Dream before their eyes could meet. "Thank you," he said stiffly.

I'm walking into a blaze den alone and unarmed. George took a deep breath in. The air tasted of sulphur. *They'll char me to dust if I'm not careful.*

A strikingly familiar form sat at what once was King Schlatt's desk, fiddling with the golden strings she'd strewn over her small horns. George's blood turned to ice.

You.

"Hello, King George," said the satyr woman. "It's been a while."

~

The pain of having his face carved open with a fish knife was the worst pain Dream had ever felt in his entire life. He'd sworn to himself afterwards that he'd never be in that amount of pain ever again, no matter the cost. It was a coward's promise, and Dream knew that all too well, but it was his only comfort on those awful days where the memory of feeling a blade pierce his cheek and lodge itself into his tongue played in his mind with such vividness that it would make him physically ill.

Perhaps it had been foolish of him to think that would be the extent of his life's suffering.

Every bone in his body was screaming. His skin was on fire. Breathing was difficult, speaking a complete impossibility. He found himself wanting to scream with every breath he forced in or out but couldn't bring his frazzled body to make a single noise. Even his tongue felt thick and foreign in his mouth, so swollen Dream was worried he'd choke.

Choking to death on my own tongue would be a mercy compared to this, Dream thought. *Anything but this.*

George and the sheep woman had been talking long enough for their voices to fade into a low drone in the back of Dream's mind. Unable to open his eyes, he sat in darkness, half-slumped in his place on the floor. He'd lost track of George's exact location in the minutes that had passed, but he could tell by the volume of his voice that he was still near. Dream's fingers itched to hold his axes and the burn of humiliation that scorched along the back of his neck was nearly unbearable. *I'm supposed to be the protector*, he thought bitterly. *I'm supposed to be the one who solves the problems.*

Perhaps that was why feeling George's fingers caress his burning skin had stung as much as it had comforted him. It was a small mercy, one Dream barely felt he deserved after the words they shared earlier that day, but it was enough to keep him sane for the time being until he came up with a plan.

Actually being able to see would help me a hell of a lot. Dream reached up and rubbed at one of his swollen eyes, but the mere touch of his fingers sent his skin aflame. Fighting off the wave of panic-induced panic that seized his chest in an iron grip, he forced his hand back into his lap and focused on the sound of George's voice as he began to speak.

"You have what you want." George's voice was muffled by the gas mask he wore, but his weariness was palpable. "I have nothing more to give you. Let my men go in peace and we'll leave you to your new territory."

"We don't have what we want, though. Not all of it," replied the sheep woman. "The ram prince lives, as do you. You are liabilities to our cause."

Cause? Are you a fucking cult? Dream wanted to scream. He shifted off his sore knees with a low

grumble and coughed. Someone whacked the back of his head hard enough for it to make his ears ring.

“Stop that,” George ordered. “You’re in the presence of your captain and a king. Have some respect for etiquette.”

The sheep woman tutted amusedly. “Don’t snap at my fiancé, George. She means no harm to your precious knight.”

“Torturing him further will not shake me into surrendering my honour. He’s built and bred for hardship.”

“It seems we’ve already shaken you, though.”

A chair creaked as if someone were standing. “You know we have the power here, George. I could order Nikki to strangle the life from your knight right before your eyes and there wouldn’t be a single thing either of you could do to stop it. *Look* at him.” Her voice deepened with sadistic amusement. “He’s barely able to keep himself conscious.”

George did not answer. The sheep woman continued, “It’s nice to see him without that horrendous mask. Where did those scars come from? Precious lapdog met something he couldn’t yap at and scare away?”

I want to tear this room into bits with you in it. Fuck you. Fuck all of you.

“Dream got those scars saving my life, and for that I will always respect him.” George’s footsteps neared until Dream could feel his presence within arm’s reach. “Let him and the rest of the knights you have hostage go free. In exchange, I will stay here as a prisoner.”

“ *No!* ”

The words burnt like acid on Dream’s tongue. Blindly, he flung himself forward and felt his fingers collide with the material of George’s cape. All that managed to come out of his mouth was a weak wheeze that made the sheep woman cackle. “And the ram boy?”

“Harmless. He’s not even thirteen. Phil and I would have taken shared control of his throne anyway.”

“King Eret doesn’t usually take prisoners, George.” The sheep woman’s hooves clicked against the wooden floorboards as she moved closer, bringing with her a cloud of terror that threatened to slaughter the last bit of control Dream had over his own body. “Should you give yourself up as you propose, you could be dead within the hour. Is that what you want?”

No, no, no. Dream’s fingers slid down the warm plushness of George’s cape, unable to get a solid grip. *Don’t do this to me, idiot. Don’t agree to this bullshit.*

“So long as I’m allowed to watch King Phil and the rest of our men leave your territory in peace. Once their safety is guaranteed to me, then I will lay down my life. Fair and square.”

“No!” Dream rasped. A warm palm pressed against his cheek, agonizingly gentle, then began to push him away. Dream yanked himself closer, humiliation forgotten. One of his arms wrapped around George’s leg and the other found the hem of George’s pant leg and grabbed it too, clutching it like a lifeline. How pitiful he must have looked, swollen and bruised and desperate, but Dream could not bring himself to care.

“Your knight doesn’t seem to be a fan of your plan, King George,” said the sheep woman.
“Perhaps he’d like to go down by your side?”

“I forbid it. He’s done his job well these many years. He deserves to live out his days in peace,” George replied smoothly.

“He’s clutching your leg like a child. If he could speak, he’d be begging to die with his precious king.” The two women’s voices burst into sardonic laughter. “Why are you denying him a knight’s greatest honour, George? Why don’t you give him what he wants?”

“Because this is what is best.” George pulled himself from Dream’s grip and disappeared into the darkness. “I refuse to let my men suffer needlessly. Let them go free before this gas of yours does some permanent damage.”

“As you command, Your Highness.” A set of hands grabbed Dream by the hair and wrenched him to his feet. “Any last words?”

“Yes, actually,” George said softly. His footsteps neared once more, slow and gentle, and paused directly in front of him. The hands in Dream’s hair retreated and his knees buckled, sending him into a set of warm, steady arms.

This can’t be the last time I’ll ever be with you. Dream pressed his trembling hands to the back of George’s head and pulled him so close the corners of their lips were touching. *Say something*, he thought in despair, but he couldn’t force more than a low moan from his throat. *Don’t let him leave. Don’t let him do this.*

“This is not me punishing you,” George whispered against his cheek. “Take care of the boys for me. I trust you.”

A sob finally forced its way free from Dream’s throat. *You asshole. You can’t die like this. It’s not fair.*

“I hereby relinquish your role as my guard.” George pressed a long kiss to Dream’s cheekbone. “Thank you for protecting me all these years. It is my honour to let you go free.”

“No,” Dream said hoarsely. Someone grabbed him by the hair and the back of his shirt and dragged him backwards. “No! No! ”

“Go in peace, Dream,” George ordered. *How can he sound so unafraid?* “That is my last order to you. See it through with honour.”

Honour be damned! Dream wanted to shriek. The hands pulling him backwards were unrelenting in their brutality, seemingly unaffected by his struggling. His heels hit the threshold of the doorway and icy terror ripped through him like an arrow. “Geor—” he tried to scream, only to have the pair of hands clap over his mouth and nose. *They’ll make him suffer before they kill him. They’ll torture him for information.* He threw back a blind punch but hit nothing. His lungs were screaming for air. The hands holding him pushed him forward and he tumbled down a marble stairwell. *You’re leaving him to spend his last moments alone and in agony.*

“Release the prisoners and bring them outside, Jack,” came the pink-haired woman’s voice. “King George has surrendered.”

“Really?” A distantly familiar voice replied. “That was easy.”

“He’s a spineless coward.” The pink-haired woman delivered a swift kick to Dream’s side as she

approached. "I'm not surprised at all. The Captain knew what she was doing."

"Bitch," Dream spat. The pink-haired woman slammed his head into the nearby wall, sending a stab of agony through the slash in his hairline. The word tingled on his tongue like a boiling whiskey. *You people are barely human.*

The pink-haired woman dragged him all the way to the castle doors. Before opening them, she bent down close to his ear and whispered a single phrase:

"It'll be nice to see him choke."

Hearing the muffled sound of her nose break as his fist shattered the front of her gas mask sent a rush of desperate satisfaction up Dream's spine.

"Oh, *you* —" With a furious grunt, the pink-haired woman pushed the castle doors open and practically threw Dream onto the grass. He hit the ground face first, feeling the fresh air wash over him like a bucket of icy water. "King George has surrendered!" The pink-haired woman cried to the open air. "In exchange for his life, the men currently in our possession shall be set free."

She bent down, sinking one of her knees into Dream's back. "Go run home, soldier boy," she hissed. "I'll make sure your king suffers for the stunt you pulled."

With one last blow to the back of his head, the weight of her knee upon his back lightened. Dream tried to stand but his knees buckled beneath him almost immediately. Someone landed beside him, their hands warm and strong, and picked him up into their arms. He could see the remains of the day's orange sunlight through his swollen eyelids, feel its gentle warmth upon his face as he was lifted into the sky.

A breath of fresh air had never been so bittersweet.

~

"Ranboo?"

Ranboo paused, resting the quill in his hands on the desk. "Yeah?"

Tubbo turned his head, letting the side of his face Ranboo could see be lit up with sunlight. "Come here. Let's chat."

Ranboo nodded and rose to his feet, cracking his stiff hips as they protested painfully. He walked out onto Tubbo's small balcony and stopped beside him, resting his elbows on the railing. Though Tubbo was barely taller than his bicep and had all the frightening qualities of a baby goat, the pensive seriousness on his face made Ranboo's stomach twist.

"Look at Tommy," Tubbo murmured, pointing a finger down into the courtyard below. Tommy sat on top of a capsized fighting dummy, surrounded by his moulted feathers. The remains of several more lay in pieces around him. "He's been out there since his dad left to take my castle back."

It had been a near twelve hours since the patrol had left. Ranboo frowned. "We should go take him in. He's probably freezing."

"He won't go in." Tubbo turned, leaning his back on the balcony railing. "Not until his dad comes home, I think."

He looks awful, Ranboo thought with a stab of guilt. Leave it to him to get busy at the one time his

friends actually needed him. “Why don’t we go and try anyway? He always agrees to hang with me if I tell him I need a second player for a board game.”

“Can I ask you something, Ranboo?”

Ranboo paused. “Uh,” he started, but the rest of his sentence died on his tongue. Tubbo slid downwards until he was sitting, pulling his knees to his chest. Ranboo mimicked him, though he was so tall he had to scooch forward as to not hit his head on the railing. “Yeah. Of course.”

“Will you help me be king?”

The question hung in the air for several long moments. Tubbo reached up and rubbed at his broken horn, keeping his eyes trained in front of him. “Huh?” Ranboo said with a nervous chuckle.

“I mean it,” Tubbo said softly. “I can’t do it on my own. Everything’s changing so quickly.”

“You’ll have King George and King Phil leading your country for you until you’re eighteen,” Ranboo said, placing a hand on Tubbo’s knee. “You won’t even need my help by the time you’re actually in charge.”

“I *want* your help.” Tubbo’s voice grew slightly louder. “You’ll be just like Technoblade to my dad. Someone who I can trust. You’d be able to make big decisions with me.”

Tommy’s angry shriek drifted up to their ears from down in the courtyard. Ranboo jolted, scrambling to stand, but Tubbo caught his hand and pulled him back. “Leave him. It’s better if he’s not interrupted when he’s like that.”

The sound of splintering wood from below made it clear to Ranboo that another fighting dummy had just met its untimely end. “I wish I could help. I don’t like seeing you guys sad.”

Tubbo smiled softly, though there seemed to be an invisible weight upon him that curled his shoulders forward. “Sadness is part of a king’s life, Ranboo. People like to try and kill you and mess with the people you love.”

“That’s messed up,” Ranboo said.

Tubbo pressed his face into his knees. “Yeah. I’m already pretty tired of it.”

A breeze blew by them, sending a shiver down Ranboo’s spine. He’d never liked the cold. “I’ll help you when you’re king. We can get Tommy in with us too, so then we’ll be like three whole kings for one kingdom. It’ll be awesome.”

“Yeah.” Tubbo scooched himself sideways until he was pressed up against Ranboo’s side. His horn poked into Ranboo’s shoulder hard enough to sting, but he didn’t care. “We’ll become so strong that nobody could ever kill us.”

“Tommy’s already one step ahead. I heard he broke Dream’s nose a little while ago.”

That made Tubbo truly giggle. “We’ll work on Tommy. He’s a little too wild right now to be a part of my kingly crew.”

“I agree,” Ranboo smiled. He slid his tail around Tubbo’s back and pulled him closer. “I’ll try my best not to die, don’t worry. Worst comes to worst, I can always teleport away from any danger.”

Something hit the railing with a resounding *thunk*, causing the two of them to jump. Tommy’s

panting figure hopped off the railing and fell to his knees before them, grumbling under his breath. “Tommy?” Ranboo said quietly. Tommy didn’t reply. His tunic was ruffled and soaked with sweat, the knees of his pants blackened with dirt and melted snow. Ranboo turned to Tubbo, whose face had already sunk back into his usual serious gentleness. “Is he okay?”

Tommy staggered into Tubbo’s room, face buried in his hands. He paused at the end of Tubbo’s bed, wrapped his wings around himself, and kicked off his shoes before crawling beneath the covers. “I need a nap,” was all he said.

“The bed’s all yours,” Tubbo replied. “Ranboo and I were going to play some chess.”

“Okay.” Tommy’s figure shifted until the only part of him visible was his head of tangled waves. “You guys can be loud and yell and shit if you want. It’s okay.”

“Sounds good.” Tubbo rose to his feet, dusting dirt off the back of his pants. “Want to get the chessboard for me, Ranboo? It should be in one of my chest drawers.”

At some point within their endless rounds of chess, amongst their laughter and shrieks of despair, Tommy shifted again. He put his pillow at the other end of the bed, just above where Ranboo and Tubbo sat on the floor, and untucked all the sheets and blankets so he could lay in the bed backwards. When Tubbo asked him why he’d moved, he responded with a mere, “I wanted to hear you guys better.”

Ranboo winced as Tubbo gleefully took one of his bishops. *If he runs a country anything like how he plays chess, the Eretians won’t come within a million feet of him.*

He wondered what Dream was doing at that moment. *Probably something cool, he thought. I hope he’s beating the shit out of an Eretian right now.*

He probably wasn’t, but it tickled Ranboo to think about it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

AYOOO WE GOT A DOUBLE CHAPPY UPDATE TONIGHT WATCH OUT

fun fact: I tell my boyfriend all abt this fic even though he knows nothing about mcyt and he encourages me and reads comments with me and that is why I would like to marry him thx

Happy international women’s day! I purposefully made the smp ladies villains bc they deserve to go a little feral and evil. its what they deserve

also may I just say that Ranboo and Tubbo now own my heart after this most recent TOTSMP.... I love them

Once again, thank you for all your comments and support! I don’t reply to all of the comments but I read and appreciate every single one ♥ Please keep giving them to me I’m a clout whore and need it to survive

-Ophelia

Getting Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What an odd man you are, George,” Said the sheep woman with a grin. “So noble and yet so cowardly. A true enigma.”

She brandished a handsome dagger from her belt and passed it between her hands. George followed it with his eyes, keeping his expression neutral. *I won't give you the satisfaction of revelling in my fear.*

“How does it feel to be without your guard?” The sheep woman strode forward and began to circle him, each click of her hooves against the floor a death knell in George's ears. “He was practically raised to be your loyal pet. Did you pick him out yourself out of a line-up or did dear old Daddy present him to you with a bow around his neck?”

“I can survive without him, just as he can survive without me,” George replied.

The sheep woman let out a high cackle. “Just like you would have survived if he hadn't been there the night I came for you? Please, King George. Don't make me laugh.”

George leaned back on his heels, gritting his teeth. The sheep woman put a hand on his head and ruffled his hair. “Don't take it personally. You simply weren't meant to be king. Think of this as King Eret taking a massive responsibility off your shoulders.”

“I'll make sure to thank him when he arrives in hell with me,” George replied.

“Don't be tart. We both know His Highness Eret is a superior king. They know what they want and they take it, simple as that.”

“You murdered a poor boy's father for no reason,” George hissed. The sheep woman clenched her fists. “King Schlatt would have handed his country over fair and square. That's how we do things. You didn't have to slaughter him.”

“Stupid fucking games, you kings all play. Meaningless drivel.” The sheep woman stepped forward and pointed her blade up under George's chin until it stung. “King Eret is frankly tired of it all. *This* is how it should be done. You take what you want to be yours and fight to keep it.”

George would have rolled his eyes if there wasn't a knife to his throat. “I apologize on behalf of all kings that we aren't bloodthirsty maniacs like you are. I'm sure the world would be a much better place if we slaughtered each other at random without thought for their children or kingdoms.”

“Don't get cocky with—“

The door behind him burst open thunderously, startling the sheep woman into nearly dropping her knife. “Nikki, what—“

A hand grabbed George's hair and yanked his head backwards with enough force to send him sprawling onto his back. The pink-haired woman leaned over him, eyes blazing furiously behind the shattered eye-holes of her mask, and sunk her fingers into the soft part of his jaw as she began to pull his mask up over his head. “Nikki!” The sheep woman cried in surprise. “What happened?”

George managed to bat her hands away from his face long enough to pull the mask back over his stinging chin. *I don't know how long the potion will last. I'll be fucked if this gas gets into me.*

“Give me your fucking mask!” The pink-haired woman shrieked. A trickle of blood dripped from a slit in the leather-like exterior of her mask. “I’m done with this asshole. I want him dead!”

Her bloodstained hand wrapped around the nozzle and yanked upwards, dragging it over his mouth. George felt his tongue hit the air as he instinctively gasped and tasted sulphur.

No pain. Not yet.

But he couldn't let them know that.

“That bastard broke my nose!” The pink-haired woman pulled the mask over the rest of George's face, tearing a tuft of his hair out as it got snagged in one of the buckles. “My mask is shattered!”

She drew in a shuddering breath and gagged, dropping George's mask into her lap as her hands reached up to cover the leaks in her mask. The sheep woman, eyes wide, slipped her knife into her belt and dropped to her knees, helping her fiancé pull the broken mask off her bloodied face. In the chaos, George dropped to his side and curled into a ball, moaning into his hands. The air felt thick and clammy in his throat like an unpleasant fog and tingled as it hit his lips and ears, but whatever made the pink-haired woman wail in pain as the air hit her broken nose had been nullified for the time being by the potion. *Bless you, Dad*, George thought as he sucked in a long breath. *I might actually get out of here alive thanks to you.*

“This is the fault of your knight!” The pink-haired woman seethed, gasping for air as the sheep woman pulled the mask over her mouth. “His ego has damned you to a painful death!”

George fought to keep the ghost of a smile off his mouth and forced out a hacking cough. *That's the Dream I know. Can't leave without getting the last blow.*

Once her mask had been properly tightened to her face and the ragged rising and falling of her chest had given way to slow, furious breathing, the pink-haired woman advanced on George on all fours. She grabbed him by both shoulders and flipped him onto his back, bending down close until the nozzle of her gas mask pressed against his cheek. George screwed his eyes shut, even as the woman dug her hands into the flesh of his face. “You aren't crying yet? I'm surprised,” she murmured. “You don't seem like someone who can handle pain.”

“Pain is part of a king's life.” George tried to mimick the raspiness of the woman's voice. Though he couldn't feel the pain of the air itself, his throat and lips became more and more dry and itchy by the second. “I welcome it with pride.”

The woman slammed her fist down on his chest, making him gasp. “I was happy to let you pass in peace like that drunkard Schlatt, but I think it'd be good for your precious knight to know you suffered a little before you died.” She unsheathed a dagger no bigger than her middle finger from a small pocket in her belt. “King's life, huh?”

George forced his thumping heart to slow and gritted his teeth. “I wouldn't trade it for the world.”

“Don't make me laugh.” The pink haired woman breathed a quiet chuckle. “I know you're scared.”

I am, but not for the reason you think.

Something exploded below them, shaking the windows. The sheep woman snarled. “Cannons. Those assholes.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Said the pink-haired woman. “They can’t come near us with our gas. Let them shatter our windows all they want.”

The sheep woman crossed the room and peered out one of the windows. She started violently. “They’re coming in!”

George’s heart leapt. *Thank the gods.*

“How?” Cried the pink-haired woman. “Do they have masks?”

“No, they—“ the sheep woman ducked as a stone flew through the window, spilling broken glass over the floor. “Shit!”

Agony burst along the underside of George’s jaw. “Where’s your honour now?” The pink-haired woman hissed as she dragged her blade across the top of his throat. Her voice was low and raspy, barely audible over the sound of the sheep woman screaming orders out the shattered window. “You said you’d give your life up fair and square.”

George hit his tongue and stretched out his fingers as warmth spilled down his throat, earning a low giggle from the pink-haired woman. His hand closed around the sharp edges of a nearby glass shard. “We’re playing by your rules now,” he growled. “We’re fighting for what we want.”

With a grunt, he thrust his upper body upwards, bashing into the pink-haired woman’s body. He grabbed a fistful of her hair in one hand and dragged her head sideways, slicing a long slash in the cheek of her gas mask with the glass shard. Another rock flew through one of the opposite windows and hit the back of the woman’s neck, stunning her long enough for George to wriggle out from under her and take off down the hall. The slit in his neck throbbed with the movement of his body, streaming blood down the front of his tunic until he was completely red from neck to wrist to belt-line. Soldiers from both armies pushed by him as he sprinted down the curved staircase, so engrossed in the chaos of the moment that they didn’t even recognize him.

“Sam!” George screamed. “Phil!”

He reached the castle doors and paused, panting wildly. Dozens of soldiers fought in the main foyer, mere blurs of armour and fists and glinting metal. A flash of green caught his eyes as Sam, practically glimmering in his armour, hurled a man straight into the wall with a single thrust of his powerful wings.

A burst of hot pain in the back of his throat made it clear he didn’t have long before the potion ran out. Ducking beneath a low-flying soldier as he soared across the hall, George climbed his way up onto one of the shattered windowsills. He kicked away as much of the glass as he could and slid through the uneven hole left in the glass, unbuttoning his cape halfway through when it caught on too many jagged pieces. The fresh air hit him like a shot of hard alcohol as he thrust his head outside. *I’m alive. I’m free.*

His ankles protested painfully as he hopped into the small garden and snuck his way through the towering square hedges. Phil’s army was in full swing, flying and fighting everywhere George looked in methodical madness. Phil himself came whizzing over George’s head and took out half a dozen Eretian soldiers with his wingspan as they came scattering out another one of the shattered windows. Arrows flew from every direction, catching in the sunlight like fireballs. Another cannon boomed, ringing in George’s ear.

So this is where you were happiest, Dad. A battlefield. George saw the back of a familiar bandana amongst the medics near the tree line and felt his heart skip. *I have to admit, it’s quite fun when*

you're the army winning.

He took a running start and sprinted down the battlefield, keeping his head low as to not be noticed. Powered by his adrenaline, he made it to the medic patrol in what felt like seconds and threw himself to his knees among them. "I'm alive!" He cried. "I'm alive!"

"King George!"

Sapnap appeared beside him and wrapped him in a bear-like hug. His face, like Dream's, was red and swollen from the effects of the gas and he stank of sulphur. "You're alive!"

He pulled back, hands on George's shoulders, and his blotchy face dropped. "Your throat!" He shrieked, grabbing the sleeve of a nearby medic. "You're covered in blood!"

George raised a tentative hand to the slice under his chin and couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled out of him. "It's not deep!" He exclaimed, even as two medics swarmed him with bandages and healing potions. "I'm okay!"

Sapnap half-coughed, half-laughed into his hands. "I thought you were dead! They said you gave up your life!" He said, kneading at his swollen eyes with his fingers.

A medic pushed a healing potion into his hands and George downed it in a single gulp. *The melony taste is growing on me.* "Thank whoever's idea it was to start throwing rocks through the windows. They saved my ass."

Sapnap's mouth dropped open. "That was me!" He pumped his fists in the air triumphantly. "I did that!"

He pulled George in for another hug and squeezed him tightly. "Dream's going to be in debt to me until he's eighty for this."

Dream. George started. "Where is Dream?" He scanned around them but saw nothing but medics hustling over unfamiliar soldiers. "Is he okay?"

Sapnap's face sobered. "King Phil basically threw him into one of the carriages and sent him home with a couple of the soldiers from our patrol that got injured the worst. He... wasn't doing too well, from what I heard."

"You didn't see him?" George said.

"I went straight back into battle with Sam once I was let free. Barely got a glimpse of him as he was carried away."

He thinks I'm dead. A pit formed in George's stomach. *He thinks I'm being tortured because of him.*

"George?" Sapnap said. "Are you alright?"

George lifted his hand and dragged a finger along the healing line on his throat. It felt like Dream's scars. "Give me something to do," he ordered. "Let's take this fucking castle back and get home."

Sapnap took a moment to process what he said. Then, a smile crossed his flushed cheeks. "Roger that, soldier! Let's go!"

~

Tommy's father had been gone for approximately seventeen hours and forty minutes.

In other words, Tommy had been spiralling for approximately seventeen hours and forty minutes.

He'd tried to go to his brothers. Emphasis on *tried*. Technoblade was never one to provide much comfort in times of need; he was stoic and awkward and too much like Phil for Tommy to even want to go near him. His ways of comfort were gentle pats on the back or polite hugs given once the issue itself had already been resolved by someone else. Fuck, usually Tommy couldn't even find him if he tried. Like his father before him, Techno had become a master at covert Tommy-avoidance and could disappear from sight for days on end before showing up at dinner like nothing had happened.

Tommy knew Techno loved him. Whether or not he liked him was a different story.

Wilbur, however, had always been the one to fill the holes Tommy's father left. He was the one to pick him up when he cried, to let him crawl into his bed on nights his brain wouldn't slow down. He was the one who could get through to him during his rage attacks, who didn't get mad if Tommy ripped out a tuft of his feathers or destroyed a book he liked. Wilbur was available, *always* available.

And yet, Tommy couldn't bring himself to open his brother's bedroom door.

Perhaps that was because he knew how much his issues weighed on his brother's shoulders, how little sleep he got on the nights Tommy slept in bed with him because he moved about all night and needed to be held still in order to sleep. Perhaps it was because he saw the way Wilbur looked at Phil and Technoblade laughing together over dinner and scowled ever so slightly. Perhaps it was because he knew Wilbur's feathers weren't growing back as quickly as they used to.

Wilbur wasn't a father. He was seventeen years old, barely done figuring himself out. The last thing he needed was Tommy hanging off his side.

So, for the first time ever, Tommy left Wilbur to sleep and made his way up to his room alone.

The castle was empty without the bustle of knights and medics. Without the constant excitement of having King George and his friends around, the halls felt sapped of any life. Tubbo was downstairs with Ranboo, probably playing chess or something. Tubbo really liked chess. He'd played about a dozen games a day since he'd heard the news about his dad.

The news that made him king.

Tommy dragged his feet along the carpet, rubbing at his face with his hands. Fuck, where *were* they? How long did it take to stab a couple assholes and take a castle over?

Maybe he's dead. Something went wrong and he's dead. An electric shiver ran across Tommy's brain. *He's dead and you'll never get to say goodbye because you wouldn't open your door for him that morning.*

Tommy groaned into his fingers. *No. That's fucking stupid and it didn't happen. You know that.*

Tubbo probably thought that same thing when his castle was invaded. That his father wouldn't die because he *couldn't*, because him being his dad somehow made him immune to swords and battles and having one's head chopped off or however the fuck a king was killed. Perhaps King George thought something similar when his dad had become sick.

He didn't notice he'd been itching frantically at his wings until his fingernail caught on a scab and

ripped it off, sending a trickle of blood down his feathers. Tommy paused, then breathed long and slow in his nose and out his mouth, just like Wilbur had told him to. In, out. In, out. In, out.

It didn't help. Not one bit.

Tommy ran the rest of the way to his room and threw himself onto his bed, burying his face in his pillows. He wanted Wilbur. He wanted his dad. Fuck, he'd be happy with fucking *Technoblade* if he walked in at that moment. Anything to not be alone, when all he had was his thoughts to keep him company. His dumb, stupid thoughts, which never made sense and always felt like they were on the verge of spilling right out of his body like one of those bubbling potions he would watch Techno make in the infirmary. His thoughts never listened to him. *Nobody* ever listened to him.

He fell asleep like that, curled on top of his covers with his wings wrapped around him. When he finally woke to the buzz of voices downstairs, the air felt thick and awkward. His tongue was dry, and when he scooted himself off his bed, he realized one of his feet had fallen asleep. *Great*.

To his immense yet muted relief, one of the first people Tommy saw as he stumbled into the infirmary was his father, alive and warm and moving. "Great job, men!" He bellowed, wiping sweat from his brow as he dumped an armful of empty potion bottles into the sink. His wings were ruffled and dirty and spotted with what Tommy swore was blood, but they opened nonetheless when he saw Tommy hovering in the doorway. "Tommy!" He exclaimed.

There was the pit in his stomach again, heavy and painful. It made him want to puke. "You stink," he forced out, scrunching his nose.

Phil's face fell. "It's been a long day. Why aren't you in bed?"

Because I haven't slept in my own bed all week and have probably lost the ability to sleep alone altogether, Tommy thought with a bristle. "I couldn't sleep," he said after a moment of silence. "You guys took a long time."

"It's a battle, Tommy. This was a relatively short one, too." Phil ran a hand through his tangled hair. "Let's go upstairs and get ready for bed."

Tommy found his limbs to have turned to stone. He stayed planted where he was, even as his father moved past him and began down the hall. It was only when Phil turned back to him with a raised eyebrow did Tommy's limbs regain the ability to move. Up the familiar staircase they went in utter silence, with Tommy staying safely out of reach of his father's wings. He couldn't be closer, couldn't allow Phil to potentially stick out a wing and pull him closer; that would be weird and awkward and *bad* and he didn't like that. Too much was already bad.

He tried not to focus on his dad's frown as they walked. He tried really hard.

The fireplace in Phil's room was already lit and roaring when they arrived. Tommy made a beeline for it immediately and stood with his back to it, letting it blaze against the back of his trousers. It felt glorious.

His peace, however, was short-lived. Phil cleared his throat. "We made it. Tubbo's castle is officially ours."

Such good news shouldn't have sent that much panic into Tommy's veins. "Cool," he said. Phil frowned again as he shrugged off his robe. "Did anyone die?"

"Tommy," his father replied with a hint of sharpness. "Don't be morbid."

"It's a battle," Tommy retorted. "People die."

"Nobody died tonight, but King George came pretty damn close. He gave up his life to save a patrol of our men that had been taken hostage in the castle. The only reason we got him out is because of his own genius little trick."

Tommy's chest tightened. "He sacrificed himself?"

Phil pulled a long nightshirt on and stretched his wings out until they trembled. "He's a king, Tommy. That's what kings do."

"Would you have done the same?"

"Of course I would have. Especially to save someone I loved."

Tommy's throat was closing. *No*, he begged internally. *Not here, not now.*

But the door across the room was closed and Tommy's feet had already begun to root to the floor, frozen when he tried to move. Face pinched into a frown, his father turned away and pulled the crown off his tangled hair. He didn't notice him, not yet, but Tommy knew he *would* and then he'd ask questions and get that awful frightened look on his face that he always got when Tommy was upset and it would all be so *horrible*. Tommy forced himself to breathe, in and out, over and over, but as seconds ticked by like hours and the sound of his own heartbeat began to boom in his ears like a church bell, he wondered if it would be more worth it to just tip back and let himself be consumed by the flames roaring behind him.

"Tommy!"

His father's arms wrapped around him, pulling him close. He stank of something sharp and metallic but Tommy hugged him back anyway, burying himself in the crook of his father's neck. The tears came a second later, hot and heavy down his cheeks. He could barely breathe. Slowly, Phil maneuvered the both of them to a sitting position, keeping a steady hand on the back of Tommy's head. "It's okay," he crooned. "You're alright, Tommy. You're alright."

"Why did you hit me, Dad?" The question left his lips as though it has a mind of its own. "Why?"

It was a stupid question and Tommy knew it. Phil froze, breath stopping in his throat. Tommy bunched his hands in the material of his father's nightshirt and sobbed until he had no more breath. *He hit you because you deserved to be hit. Because you're a fucking maniac.*

"It was an awful mistake, Tommy. I lashed out in a moment of pain," Phil said in a shaky whisper. "It wasn't your fault."

"I didn't mean what I said! I promise!"

"I know. I know." Phil's fingers carded themselves into Tommy's hair and began to move in small circles against his scalp. "You were hurting too."

Tubbo would kill to have his dad be holding him right now. Another bubbling sob forced its way out of Tommy's mouth. His throat felt raw. *He wants what you've been pissing away all this time more than anything.*

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Tommy whimpered. "Nothing makes sense."

"You're still growing up," his father replied. "There's nothing wrong with you."

“Yes there is! Technoblade hates me! He avoids me!”

“He doesn’t—“ Phil pulled back and pointed a finger at him. His eyes were wet and shining. “Don’t you ever say that. Techno loves you more than anything.”

“It doesn’t feel like it!” Tommy’s voice had risen to a grating shriek but the burn felt good. “He knows I’m all fucked up! Wilbur does too!”

“You’re Wilbur’s best friend!”

Are you? Hissed the unspoken voice behind his father’s words. *Are you? Or have I been wrong all these years?*

“Wilbur’s had to play dad for so long that I think he’s started to hate me too!”

Something within Tommy snapped and he wrenched himself from his father’s arms, bending his face to the floor. “All — all fucking three of you hate me!” He screamed. “I know you do! You’re all shit at hiding it!”

Phil’s mouth dropped open. “ *Tommy!* ”

Tommy wanted to run, to be *anywhere* else but there, but his legs were frozen. He felt as though he’d just puked up all his organs, leaving his body an empty shell with nothing inside.

Meanwhile, his father looked like someone had just punched a fist through his ribcage and torn his heart straight out of his chest.

Tommy pulled his wings in around him. They smelt of sweat and blood. “I’m going to bed now,” he whispered, forcing himself up onto his knees. “Goodnight, Dad.”

“Stay, Tommy.” Phil’s voice was no more than a trembling whisper. “Please.”

“I’m going to Wilbur’s room.”

“No, you’re not. You’re staying here.”

“I *want* to go to Wilbur’s room.”

“I don’t want you going to his room anymore. You can come to me now, anytime. I don’t care how busy I am.” Phil sat back on his knees and outstretched his arms. The tear tracks down his face looked like glimmering festival paint in the light of the fire. “I’m so sorry, Tommy. I’ll make this right. *Let* me make this right.”

Tommy closed his eyes scooted back into his father’s arms. “I’m glad you made it home safe, Dad.”

Phil kissed the top of Tommy’s head and stifled a sob into his hair. “I’m glad too,” he whispered. “Do you want to sleep in here tonight?”

“Yeah.”

I’m still hurting. Tommy felt his father’s arms slide beneath his knees and under his wings. *Something’s changed, but I can’t tell if it was for the better or not.*

Phil lifted him into his arms and walked away from the fire’s gentle glow. A moment later, Tommy felt himself be placed onto his father’s bed and tucked beneath a heavy blanket.

“I have to clean my wings,” Phil said softly. “You go ahead and rest. I’ll be right here with you.”

“I love you, Dad.” Tommy breathed a sigh. *Please don’t let this just be for tonight. I can’t go back to the way things were.*

“I love you too, Tommy. I’m sorry.”

It took mere minutes for the smell and warmth and sound of his father rustling around in the bathroom to lull Tommy to sleep.

~

George pressed on the infirmary door with two fingers. It creaked open easily.

“I had to sedate him,” Technoblade said from behind him. What might have been shame weighed heavy on his words. “He was violent with the nurses.”

“It’s alright. I’ll take care of him now,” George said. He swallowed, feeling the half-healed tissue on his throat pull uncomfortably. “All I ask for is some privacy.”

“Of course. I’ll be up in my father’s office if you need me.”

George closed his eyes and tried to focus on Technoblade’s retreating footsteps, but he moved lighter on his feet than a ghost. *What an odd man. He truly is his brother’s antithesis.*

The infirmary was dark as he walked in, the air slightly cool without any candles to keep it warm. The air stank of sulphur.

A single figure lay in the small bed, curled so tightly into himself that he looked no bigger than a teenager.

George placed a hand on Dream’s side. He was warm.

“Dream?”

Chapter End Notes

DOUBLE UPLOAD BITCHES

we hit 20k hits!!! Thank you all so much!!!

keep it up (threat)

this chapter hurt to write but fun fact! I have experienced tear gas before and based the dragon’s breath off of it :) tear gas rly hurts and I don’t like it

I haven’t even started the next chapter yet but oh boy I have plans,,, it’s gonna be big,,, and painful,,, (like Dream’s face sfkfjdkh)

-Ophelia

Rise Anew

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Dream?”

Dream’s steady yet ragged breathing stopped. “Dream?” George repeated, fear sharp and heavy in his stomach. Dream brought his face out from where he’d buried it into his arms, his movements unsteady and sluggish, and turned it towards the direction of George’s voice as though he were a bear rising from a long hibernation. Though the room was dark, George could see him shaking, see the expression of terror painted onto his face.

His eyes are still swollen shut, George thought with a chill. *He’s been blind this whole time.*

He took a couple steps forward, then knelt by Dream’s bedside and pressed their foreheads together. Dream recoiled with a strangled gasp. “I’m okay, Dream. I’m here,” George murmured. “I’m alive.”

Dream jolted as if he’d been shocked. In a single motion, he forced his upper body off the bed and threw his arms around George’s shoulders. George fell backwards with a grunt, dragging Dream out of the bed with him, and the two of them collapsed into a heap on the floor. Dream pressed his face into the crook of George’s neck and squeezed so tightly that his muscles began to shake.

“I’m here,” George said against Dream’s tangled hair. A large shudder wracked Dream’s body. He raised a trembling hand to George’s face and cupped it gently, running his thumb over George’s lips and cheeks and the slope of his nose. “Relax now, Dream. I’m here.”

“You’re such an idiot,” was all Dream managed to say before his voice broke. George pulled him back to his chest and held him there as he sobbed, rubbing circles into his back. He was warm to the point of being feverish, as though his body was expelling his anguish from every pore.

“I’m sorry.” George’s thumb found the swollen tissue beneath Dream’s eye and pressed there, massaging gently. “I had to do what I did to save you.”

Dream tried to speak again but was unable to breathe in enough air to do more than shudder and choke. Instead, he raised one of his fists and beat weakly against George’s chest. George chuckled desolately. “Mad at me, huh?”

“I—“ Dream let out a hacking cough— “I *hate* you.”

The fist pressed to George’s chest opened as another round of sobs shook Dream’s body. George took Dream’s hand in his own and held it against him, squeezing his clammy fingers. “That would have killed me,” Dream whimpered. “You knew that.”

George breathed in the scent of Dream’s hair. The stink of sulphur seemed to finally be fading, replaced with the smell of sweat and tears and the lingering odour of medical sterility. *How can you care for me so much and still not feel the same way I do?* He pressed another kiss to Dream’s head, right along the bandage on his hairline. “You would have healed, Dream. You don’t need me.”

Dream didn’t reply to that, and George forced the conversation no more. They sat on the floor in silence for several minutes, George rocking the two of them side to side. It wasn’t until his own

heavy eyes began to droop that Dream pulled himself out of George's arms and leaned back on his heels. "Let's get you to bed," he said. The swelling around one of his eyes had shrunk enough for George to see his pupil. "It's been a long day for you."

"Dream!" George batted Dream's hands away as they went to grab his shoulders. "Are you seriously trying to coddle me right now?"

"You nearly *died* today," Dream said with a hint of sharpness. "Of course I'm going to make sure you're okay."

George clenched his fists and hoped Dream was still blind enough to not see him scowl. "You can barely see! I should be caring for you!"

"That's not your job." Dream rose to his feet, wobbling slightly, and held out his hand for George to take. "I'll take you to your room and get you something to eat. I know you need it."

You're slipping away from me again. I can feel you withdrawing. George bit back the retort on his tongue and breathed a huff through his nose. *Maybe it's best if I play along and let you re-draw the lines in the sand.*

He took Dream's hand and allowed him to pull him to his feet. Upon seeing the slash mark on George's throat, now no more than a faint white line, Dream stiffened and muttered something beneath his breath. "It's fine," George murmured. "It wasn't that deep anyway."

"Doesn't matter. I'll kill those monsters for what they did to you." Dream grabbed a spare healing potion off the counter and slipped it into his pocket. "For now, let's just focus on getting you into bed."

He moved to the door, quick despite his shaky legs, and had just cracked it open enough to let a sliver of golden light in when he froze. His hands flew to his face. "My—" he gasped. "My mask! Where's my mask?"

I hadn't even realized it was gone, George thought with a jolt. *I've got no clue where it is.*

"Where the fuck is it?" Dream darted back to his bed and tore off the sheets. "Where the fuck is it, George?"

"I have no clue," George replied. "It could still be back in Manburg. I haven't seen it."

Dream's face twisted until he was baring his teeth. "Fuck!" He buried his face in his hands. "This day can't get any worse."

George felt a ripple of anxiety run through him as Dream collapsed back to his knees, groaning into his hands. "You can use my cape to cover your face," he said. "My room isn't that far—"

"It's not that." Dream's voice cracked. "Just—*fuck*, give me a second."

George pursed his lips. Dream fell into silence, stifling a sob with his hand. A moment passed, then another, and George felt whatever frustration-induced resolve he had crack. "Dream."

"Shut up! You know I don't like to be without my mask." Dream wiped at his eyes. "Somebody should have fucking taken it home with us."

"*Dream*," George repeated sternly. "Let's just stay in here for now."

“But you need to go to bed!”

“There are beds in here. I’ll be fine.”

Dream smacked the floor with his fist. “Fuck,” he breathed. “Fuck. I hate this. I hate this so much.”

George moved to him, kneeling by his side. “Come on,” he said, sliding his arms beneath Dream’s armpits. “We’ll figure everything out in the morning.”

“Please just go see Quackity,” Dream mumbled weakly, limply allowing George to shuffle the two of them back to his bed. “I don’t want this. Please.”

He flopped back into his pillows and buried his feet into the mound of torn-off sheets at the end of his bed. George ripped a fresh blanket off one of the empty beds and threw it over him, covering Dream from ear to toe. “Hard chance,” he said. “I’m a selfish man and I’ve got feelings for you. Bit hard to get rid of me now.”

The words sent a spark of embarrassment down his throat as they left his mouth. George paused, biting down on the tip of his tongue. “Asshole,” Dream muttered, but there was a softness to his voice that warmed the cold embers in George’s chest. A silent acquiescence. *Fine, you won. Care for me.*

George pulled a chair from beside one of the nearby beds and sat down, resting his elbows by Dream’s arms. “Does your face hurt?”

Dream shifted into his side, slipping the healing potion from his pocket, and pressed it into George’s hands. “Not besides the cut. Techno won’t put any potions on it until tomorrow. He’s afraid of trapping the gas in my bloodstream or some shit.”

“And your eyes?”

“I hate not being able to see. I *hate* it. It reminds me of—” Dream raised a hand and made several aggressive slashing motions over his face— “I haven’t been able to see with both my eyes for like, four hours or something.”

I totally forgot that the attack nearly blinded him. George mentally traced a scar that slid directly over one of Dream’s eyes. *I never would have guessed that to be a trigger of his. Seems obvious now.*

“Fuck.” Dream’s voice cracked. He turned his head away, choking into his fist. “I need my fucking mask. I could do without everyone seeing my face even more than they already have.”

“I’ll arrange something with Phil tomorrow,” George promised gently. “For now, I’ll make sure you have scarves and cloth to cover yourself with. We can even get you a pair of goggles if you’d like.”

“Then I’d look like you,” Dream replied with a tearful chuckle. “Little moon-eyed king with his stupid goggles to help him see colours.”

“Hey!” George couldn’t fight the blush that crept up his cheeks. “I think they’re quite handsome. And practical.”

“They’re endearing. Stupid, but endearing.”

Dream closed his eyes. George rested his head in the crook of his arm, watching the gentle flutter

of Dream's eyelids. "I meant it, you know. When I said I wasn't punishing you."

Dream's softening face hardened once more. "Let's not start with this."

"I feel like you don't believe me," George said. "But I really wasn't punishing you. It was the only way I could get you and the others outside."

"You're going to make me angry again," Dream said quietly. "I can't talk about this."

George shut his mouth and breathed a wincing sigh. "I just wanted you to know."

He closed his eyes, hurt blooming in his chest. Then, to his surprise, a warm hand curled around his own. "Sorry," Dream muttered. His hands were warm and steady, larger than George's by a noticeable amount. "It hurts to think about. You... sacrificing yourself for me."

"A king's life is all about sacrifices. You can't be mad at me for that."

"Well, I am." Dream's voice took on an edge of sharpness. "You would have died for *me*. That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"I would have died for you *and* Sapnap *and* the rest of the men who were captured. That's worth dying for."

"No we're not! We're knights! We're meant to be in danger!"

George pursed his lips. "The Eretians knew what they were doing. If I hadn't taken the initiative and forced them to release you, they would have taken me hostage with you guys anyway."

"So you played right into their trap!"

"I'm not an idiot, Dream!" George slammed his fist down on the mattress. "How hard is it for you to wrap your head around the fact that I know what I'm doing sometimes? That I'm not the blundering idiot you seem to think I am?"

"Go fucking see Quackity!" Dream ordered. "Please! I can't deal with your shit right now!"

"No! Fuck you!" George turned away from Dream with a scowl and laid his head back down, pinching his eyes shut. "I'm going to stay here whether you want me or not."

Dream fell silent with a frustrated sigh.

There, asshole. George mentally kicked away the urge to feel Dream's hand on his own again. *Try and get rid of me now.*

~

Gods help me. Dream breathed in but found no air. *Please, Gods. Please help me.*

George hadn't moved or spoken since their argument. Though Dream couldn't see his face, he'd have bet on him having fallen asleep. Unable to move most of his body without the chance of waking George up, Dream lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling, wishing he could reach inside his chest and tear his rapidly-beating heart straight out of his ribcage.

He kept one of his hands by his side, mere inches from George's slightly curled fingers.

Fuck. It was all too familiar.

“George?”

George didn't reply. His face was buried in the crook of his uninjured arm, hidden from view. Dream reached up and poked gently at the side of his head. “George?”

George stirred, but only slightly, and seemed to return to his peaceful slumber a mere moment later. Dream laid his hand back down on the bed, running his fingers over the rough cotton sheets in slow, calming motions. I'm alive, George is alive, and I can see through both my eyes. This is the best case scenario. The bridge of his nose ached horribly. Dream was sure the man had sliced all the way down to his muscle. I should be grateful right now.

Dream's thoughts were of little comfort to him. Though he'd begged the nurses not to let Sapnap in when he'd come running, being alone was near torture. The silence was too loud, too empty, as though more assassins could hide themselves in the spaces between the low chatter outside and the beating of Dream's own heart.

Perhaps that was why when George had crept in, holding a stolen painkiller in his hands, Dream had asked him to stay.

“Are you asleep, George?” Dream whispered. “Your Highness?”

George shifted, mumbling something Dream couldn't hear. His injured hand opened as if momentarily stretching then, to Dream's utter shock, closed around Dream's fingers. His skin was cool, slightly dry from having been cleaned of blood so many times.

Dream stared at their interlocked hands for longer than he'd have liked. George's fingers moved ever so slightly, squeezing the air from his lungs. Oh, gods. This is my true punishment.

Slowly, as to not wake him, Dream pulled his fingers from George's grip and tried to hold back the tears.

Whatever gods were out there must have been sadistic freaks. Either that, or Dream wasn't nearly as good of a person as he thought he was.

*Dream turned his head, wincing as the swollen flesh beneath his eyes ached with the movement. George was far too close, close enough for Dream to smell the hint of melon on his sleeping breath and watch his eyelashes flutter as he moved. All Dream would need to do to feel the softness of George's hands again was stretch his fingers an inch or two to the side. The horrible part of him was clawing at his insides, ravenous to hold what he'd thought had been taken from him forever. A voice in his brain sidled up to his ear, soft and deadly. *You have him right here in front of you. You know he'd love you back if you just gave him a chance to.**

*Dream found his fingers inching closer and yanked them to his chest, bunching his raw fingers in the material of his tunic. *Pull back. Disengage. Don't do this to yourself, you idiot. You'll ruin everything.**

Ruin had tempted him before, in a dimly-lighted nether cave, in an empty kitchen over a plate of old pastries Dream could barely taste. It had made his fingers itch and his lips tingle and filled his head with impossibilities that were a little too sweet to completely push away. Dream had been able to pull himself back each time, to fall back into his familiar role when his dance along that unseen ledge became too dangerous for comfort.

Never before had it been impossible to ignore.

Aether Almighty. Dream let a single finger curl around George's. The taste of fear hit his tongue,

softened by something sweet. *I'm digging my own grave right now.*

“Are you alright?”

George raised his head, blinking blearily. “Did you tap me?” He murmured.

Dream tried to pull his finger from George’s hand but found himself to be frozen. “Uh, I—” His tongue went dry— “I’m in pain.”

That wasn’t a total lie, but Dream felt humiliation burn down the back of his neck nonetheless as George’s face puckered with worry. “Do you need me to go get prince Technoblade or a nurse?”

Dream shook his head. “I’m okay. Just aching. The cut, you know. It aches.”

He pulled his hand from George’s grip and pointed to his hairline. *Way to save it, idiot.* Giving George a bashful smile didn’t seem to help the situation. “You let me sleep while you were in pain?” George said, miffed. “I thought we were going to work together now.”

“Who said that?” Dream said.

“Me, just now.” George scowled and leaned in close, scanning the bruised slash with narrowed eyes. “No more stupid fights. Let’s be a team.”

“We are a team. You’re a king, and I’m your knight—“

“You’re not my knight anymore,” George cut in. “I nullified your contract back in Manburg.”

“You were serious?” Dream wanted to bury his face in his pillow and scream. *If one more thing about my life changes today, I think I’ll die on the spot.*

“Yeah, I was. I want us being equals now. You’ve saved my life, I’ve saved yours. Boom.” George sat back and ran a hand through his tousled hair. “Equals.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re royalty. I was picked up off the streets.”

“Can’t fucking win with you, I swear.” George rolled his eyes and slapped his palms down on his knees. “Want to keep me safe? Work with me as an equal. A p—“ his face blanched with momentary hesitation— “Teammate. A friend, at least.”

“I am your friend,” Dream said.

“But you’re not my equal. Not in your head, at least.”

You’re asking the impossible of me, George. Dream let out a small breath. “Fine. Let’s be a... little duo, or whatever. Equals.”

George gave him a toothy grin and clapped his hands together triumphantly. *Of all the smiles in the world, that one’s my favourite.* “Does that mean you’ll teach me how to fight?”

Dream blinked. “What?”

“Hand-to-hand combat. I want to learn, just in case I ever need to defend myself.” George smiled hopefully. “I am teaching you how to read, so it’s only fair.”

“Sapnap’s better at hand-to-hand,” Dream said. “You’d be better off getting him to teach you.”

“I want to learn from you! We have to have, like, similar fighting styles if we want to work well together. Please?”

Dream rubbed at his eyes and groaned. “Fine. But don’t bitch at me if I’m not a good teacher.”

“Hell yeah,” George said confidently. “Sounds like a deal to me.”

He stuck his hand out and Dream took it without thinking, swallowing as George gave his fingers a playful squeeze.

“Deal.”

~

“I seriously hope you’re kidding.”

The disbelief in Technoblade’s voice made Tommy freeze in his tracks. Eyeing the closed door with curiosity, Tommy crept up to the wall and stuck his ear into the space beneath the hinge.

“We need to get the SMP kingdom back under our control as quick as humanly possible.” His father’s voice was quiet yet firm. “The only End portal in the entire continent sits within that kingdom. If the Eretians have already managed to open it, all of our kingdoms are in grave danger.”

“The Eretians would have bragged about it if they’d opened it, Dad. We’d know by now.”

“They used Dragon’s Breath to create that noxious gas back at Manburg. Do you think it’s possible they got all of that imported from the tamed dragons across the sea? Fat chance, Techno. I think they’re already in and probably wreaking havoc on the end cities and the dragon population.”

There’s an End portal here? Tommy thought in awe. He shrunk momentarily as his father’s footsteps neared the door, but Phil only paused to pick what sounded like a heavy scroll from one of the small tables by the wall and walk back to his desk. “We have to invade now,” he said. “There’s a reason Eret’s father was never given access to the portal. George’s father knew to keep him as far from it as he could.” Phil let out a groaning sigh. “I should have killed that man before he had the chance to reproduce. It seems that darling heir of his is turning out to be more of a nightmare than he was.”

“Our men are exhausted! Half of them are still in Manburg, including Sam, who’s one of the only ones I actually trust to do such a large mission!” Techno replied. “King George and Dream are certainly in no position to face another battle, either. Dream’s got enough poison in his blood to kill a horse.”

“We’ll need to reach out. I want you to send a scroll to all the nearby kingdoms — the Badlands, Boomerville, even the Holy Lands. Everyone that may send us men. They may take us seriously if they know what’s at stake.”

“Would you and I be going into battle too? Assuming we leave King George here to hold down the fort.”

“Yes. I think you’re ready for it. I certainly need someone at my side.”

Those words made Tommy’s fingers itch. He wasn’t sure why.

The door opened suddenly, knocking Tommy onto his back. Technoblade walked out, face turned back towards Phil, and nodded. "I'll go prepare the scrolls."

"I trust you, Techno. We got this," Phil said.

Techno gave him a small smile, which looked quite weird on his solemn face. When he turned and saw Tommy in a heap on the floor, glaring up at him with what he hoped was palpable manly rage, he jumped. "Can I help you?" He asked, uncharacteristically taken off guard. "Are you here to see Dad?"

I just heard all the cool scary shit you were talking about with dad and there's nothing you can do about it! Tommy wanted to reply. "I was just passing by and you hit me with the door," he said, keeping himself cool. "I think I deserve an apology."

"Mmh." Techno outstretched his hand. "Sorry 'bout that. Come on, then."

Tommy took it, scowling, and smoothed his ruffled feathers. Techno's inky wings were slightly outstretched to either side; a sure sign that he was frazzled or upset. They were meticulously taken care of, too, making Tommy all the more aware of the bald spots on his own wings that hadn't yet grown over. Despite being only seven years Tommy's senior, Techno walked and talked like someone who had been alive for hundreds of years. It annoyed Tommy to no end.

"Where are you going?" Techno asked, closing the door behind him. He motioned for Tommy to start walking with him, which Tommy did, albeit after seriously considering just sprinting away.

"To go see Ranboo and Tubbo," Tommy replied quietly. *So I can tell them all the awesome shit I just overheard*, he added internally.

Techno nodded. "I think I'm going to go take a nap. It's been a long day."

What a fucking dirty liar you are. Technoblade had never taken a nap in his life. Tommy was at least decently sure that he thought they were illegal or something. "Naps are fun," he said. "I've got to go now, though. You walk too slow and I've got to take a massive shit."

"Gross," Techno mumbled.

"Goodbye!" Tommy opened his wings and launched himself upwards, leaving his brother walking behind him. He soared around the corner, feeling a mix of annoyance, dread, and excitement bubble in the pit of his stomach. *The Eretians could have access to End shit! Like dragons! I have to tell Tubbo and Ranboo!*

That, however, was easier said than done. Tommy did three rounds of the castle in record time, checking the courtyard, all three of their bedrooms, the kitchen, and even the unused bathroom in the knights' quarters where he'd once caught them gossiping. And yet, his friends were nowhere to be found. The servants he accosted in the halls or courtyard simply replied that they'd seen the pair walking about minutes earlier, but no matter where Tommy looked, they were nowhere to be seen. Panting, sweaty, and downright pissed, Tommy plopped himself down on one of the courtyards lower railings and pulled his knees to his chest. *At least if they see me sulking, they'll come straight over and pay lots of attention to me*, Tommy thought. *Tubbo's always extra nice to me when he thinks he's made me jealous.*

Jealousy was far too childish for Tommy to ever admit feeling, especially to Tubbo or Ranboo. He wasn't jealous at all. Not one single bit. If anything, he was extra *un*-jealous, as he'd been the one to introduce Ranboo to Tubbo in the first place. And yeah, Tommy couldn't teleport or make

Tubbo laugh by sleepwalking all over the palace and snatching blankets off soldiers and servants as they slept just to bring them all to Tubbo's bed, but he knew he'd always be Tubbo's number one best friend, no matter what.

Tommy nodded to himself, feeling rather smart. A breeze blew by and tickled the bald spots on his wings.

Out of the corner of his eye, something glimmered.

Tommy turned his head, staring into a patch of thick trees near the entrance to the forest. Sure enough, something small sat upon one of the low branches of an evergreen tree, glittering in the morning light. It looked to be made of gold.

Wait a second. Gold?

Tommy jumped to his feet and glided off the railing, hitting the ground in a jog. Sure enough, there was a small golden figure resting in the branches, staring at him with glimmering green eyes. It was no bigger than a parrot, seemingly made of solid gold, with a square head and a squat little body on which there were two fluttering wings. It chuffed as Tommy neared, but didn't seem to be afraid of him. "Hello?" Tommy said, raising a finger at the odd creature. "Who are you?"

The creature nuzzled against his fingers, making an odd half-purring noise that sounded more like a small blaze than any sort of cat or bird. Its metallic skin was cold beneath Tommy's hand as he patted it. "You're a strange little thing. Who are you?"

The creature's emerald eyes focused on something behind Tommy. As if in excitement, it raised its little wings and chirped.

A brown sac crashed down over Tommy's head, blinding him.

Oh, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

George: please let's be equals

Dream, holding a stick and foaming at the mouth: for the love of everything that's holy please stop giving me rights

ACT 2 BEGIIIIINS WOOOHOOO! I'm so excited to delve more into my plot and lots more of the characters. Dnf is fun and all but Tommy's plot line? Literally carrying the whole story bc all dnf knows is have near death experience, have Guilty Homosexual Thoughts, not communicate, and lie

Can anyone guess who our mysterious kidnapped is? Or our tonky little friend? They'll be... important >:)

Thank you so much for all the lovely comments on my double update. It made me so motivated to get my chapters out quick to make you guys happy :)

sad I couldn't capitalize off of Helium's hype but oh well,,, you can't catch all the clout ☹️

-Ophelia

Outwitted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being equals with Dream was a lot harder than George had expected.

“He just up and left? Why’d you let him leave?”

“I couldn’t stop him!” George leaned back on his chair and huffed in exasperation. “He’s made a point to rebuke every single thing I say since I told him we were equals this morning. Doesn’t listen to anything!”

Quackity buried a laugh into his hand, but his eyes were sympathetic. “That’s what you get for being a sap, man. I bet he’s got years of pent-up rage at not being able to say no to you. You have to let him get over his rebellious phase.”

“I’m not his parent, and he’s not a kid. He should know better than to go check the castle borders with Sapnap when he’s still got enough poison in his blood to take down a cow,” George said. “If I get the call that he passed out or something and cracked that stupid head of his open, I’m not going to pity him for it. Not one bit.”

“You guys really got hit hard with the Eretian thing, huh?” Quackity said, raising a finger to fiddle mindlessly with one of the pieces of his hair behind his ear. “Sapnap told me all about it.”

“That was my first time actively giving up my life,” George murmured. “I feel like my dad would open up a bottle of champagne and celebrate if he was still here. It seems he was always giving himself up to save someone else.”

Quackity gave a nervous laugh. “I don’t even want to imagine it, man. It was scary enough when they brought Dream in and he was screaming all sorts of crazy shit. Nobody believed him when he said you were dying.” He put his feet up on the small table between them and rested his hands on his knees. “I thought he was just hallucinating or something.”

George cringed away the image that shot into his mind’s eye. “Gods almighty. Don’t mention any of that to Dream. He’s humiliated about everyone seeing his face.”

“I wouldn’t consider myself having seen his face,” Quackity said. “Y’know, because it was all swollen and bloody and stuff. I tried not to look, too.”

George sighed through his nose. *I’d kill for some tea right now, but it seems all the servants have disappeared.* “I’ll mention that to him if he says anything.”

Something shifted on Quackity’s face and he bit at his lip as if holding something back. George raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay?”

“Don’t freak out,” Quackity said immediately, the barest hint of an embarrassed flush climbing up his cheeks. “Sapnap may have told me something else too.”

George’s heart dropped. “And what is that?” He asked, though the answer to that question had already begun to rattle off the inside of his skull like an angry bird in a cage.

“What happened, uh—“ Quackity grinned bashfully, looking more like a frightened animal than

anything else— “Between you and Dream, a little while ago. That stuff.”

“Sapnap knows?” George groaned. “Fuck— I mean, I kind of expected it, but Aether Almighty. What did he tell you?”

“That Dream rejected you,” Quackity replied with a wince. “But like, Sapnap seems to think that Dream was stupid as shit for doing that, so that bodes well for—“

George cut him off with a loud moan and buried his face in his hands. Quackity kicked his ankle and dissolved into a fit of giggles. “Stop that! I’m not judging you. I’ve kind of known for a while that there was something between you two.”

“Since when?”

“Since you guys got here.”

“Gods, kill me,” George said through his fingers. “I think I’m losing my mind.”

“Hey, man. The first step in getting over your feelings means you have to be able to joke about it. Dream’s just a dude you find a little sexy. What’s to fear about that?”

“Please never refer to Dream as sexy on my behalf ever again,” George said. “And he’s been tasked to be by my side for my entire life. Something tells me that having unrequited romantic tension will make the next however many years pretty awkward.”

“I feel you two will work it all out. You two are smart guys.”

“I think you’re overestimating me.” George stood, cracking his stiff back. Instead of following him, Quackity only sunk farther into the cushioned seat and closed his eyes comfortably. “Phil’s keeping you busy with Tommy, huh?”

“No, actually. Not anymore,” Quackity replied with a small shrug. “Maybe he’s trying something a little more hands-on to try and tame that kid.”

“Good. Tommy probably needs it,” George said. “Bet that takes a weight off your shoulders.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. He barely wanted to be around me anyway. I’d get three hours of relative peace with him before a switch would flip and he’d be screaming in my face to let him see his brother or that Ranboo enderman kid.”

“Fun.” George grimaced lightly. He’d never been good with children. “I think I’m going to go find Phil. He was supposed to meet me in here fifteen minutes ago to discuss invasion plans for our kingdom.”

“Home!” Quackity raised his fists triumphantly.

“Home,” George repeated with a small nod. “A home that’s hopefully not been razed to the ground by Eretian idiocy.”

There came a knock at the door. “Come in!” George called. *Can’t be Phil or Dream*, he thought to himself. *I doubt they’d ever knock.*

In walked a nervous-looking servant whose face fell as soon as he scanned the room. “Have you seen the young prince?” He asked timidly.

George’s stomach dropped. *What now, you little arse?* “Not at all today. Is he alright?”

“He was reported missing by his friends earlier today. The last person to see him was prince Technoblade just after the sun had risen.”

It's well past noon now. “And nobody noticed until now that he was gone?”

“I’m not sure, your Highness,” the servant said with a nervous smile. “If you haven’t seen him, I’ll be on my way.”

George raised a hand to stop the servant as they went to scurry out. “Do Dream and Sapnap know of his disappearance?”

“The guards at the border? Yes, your Highness. They’re looking for him now.”

“And King Phil?”

“Up in his chancery with prince Technoblade.”

“Alright, thank you.” George waved the servant out and turned to Quackity, who bore a small grimace. “Duty calls. Come and find me if you ever want to chat.”

“Of course, man,” Quackity smiled. “Don’t be an idiot while I’m not there to babysit you!”

George grabbed his cape off his bed and swung it over his shoulders. “Fuck off.”

“You know you love me!”

“Not one bit!”

~

George hadn’t seen Phil look so distraught since they’d gotten the news of Schlatt’s death. The moment George pushed open the chancery door, Phil was upon him in a flurry of feathers, eyes wide and frightened. “Have they found him?” He demanded.

“Not yet,” George said. Phil took a step back and rubbed his face with his hands, groaning softly. Behind him, prince Technoblade sat in a chair by the window, looking about as worried as George had ever seen him. “I bet Tommy’s fine, Phil. He’s probably found a little nook to nap in somewhere.”

“Every servant, soldier, cook, and guard have been raking every inch of this castle for the last several hours, King George. He’s not here.” Phil covered his mouth with his hand. “Someone took him. He’s in danger, he—“

“Dad,” Technoblade said sternly. “Sit down before you pass out.”

Phil whirled around, robes flaring. “I have to find my son!” He yelled. “He could be in mortal danger for all we know!”

Technoblade furrowed his brows. “Getting yourself into a panic won’t help anyone, especially not Tommy. What we need is a plan of action.”

“Dream and Sapnap are already checking the border,” George added.

“And I sent Wilbur out to go with them,” Technoblade replied. “If they don’t come back with anything, I say we start sending patrols out into town and into the forest.”

“He couldn’t have gotten too far; three hours of walking will barely get you to the country border into Manburg.” George placed a comforting hand on Phil’s shoulder. The man only sighed. “He’ll be alright, Phil. I doubt anyone could have snatched Tommy without him kicking and screaming up a storm. The whole country would have been made aware.”

“Oh,” Phil said. “I just can’t take the chance. The Eretians are furious, George. You know they don’t like to lose.”

As much as George would have liked to disagree and give the poor man a meagre crumb of comfort, Phil was right. The Eretians never took kindly to a loss, especially not a downright disastrous one. Given their history, what kind of danger would Tommy be in their hands?

“No matter what,” George said, “We’ll keep on top of them. They certainly couldn’t have gotten far in a couple hours.”

A large shadow slammed against one of the windows, startling Technoblade right out of his chair. It was Wilbur, eyes wide, pressed up against the windowpane with something clutched in his hand. *Feathers*, George realized with a jolt. Springing back to his feet, Technoblade unlatched the window and swung it open, allowing Wilbur to jump in and run to his father with his hands outstretched. “There was a shit ton of his feathers by a spot in the tree line,” he painted, shoving the crumpled feathers into Phil’s shaking hands. “Someone must have snatched him from there!”

“Any blood?” Phil asked. “Any signs of a struggle?”

“Nope, just feathers.” Wilbur threaded his hands into his hair and made a small noise in the back of his throat. “If I’d have just been watching him, this wouldn’t have—“

“Don’t blame yourself!” Phil cut in sharply. “It isn’t your job to babysit him every day. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

Wilbur closed his mouth and gritted his jaw as it began to tremble. “What now, then?”

“I’ll write up a very nicely-worded letter telling the Eretians to give me back my son or face the consequences,” Phil said, face hardening into a steely mask. He walked to his desk, slammed the feathers down onto it, and grabbed a quill with as much vigour with which he’d hold a sword. “And then we send out patrols to scour every inch of this goddamn country until Tommy turns up.”

Phil drew in a shaky breath and locked eyes with George. “Dead or alive.”

~

Tommy’s day had officially been ruined.

Not because he’d been kidnapped. That, somehow, had been far less of a horrific experience than he’d expected. Sure, being thrown into what seemed to be a potato sack and tossed over his kidnapper’s shoulder like he weighed nothing hadn’t been too much fun, but his kidnapper didn’t beat him or threaten him or tell him all the ways in which he could die at their hands. He was nice, all things considered, and did stuff like make sure Tommy’s wings were properly folded within the sack so they wouldn’t get sore. All and all, Tommy was being treated far better than he’d ever expect from a kidnapper.

No. Tommy’s day was ruined because his kidnapper had to be the stupidest person to ever walk the face of the planet.

“How are you?”

“Being kidnapped,” Tommy mumbled. “And I don’t like it.”

He’d spent the first hour of their strange journey screaming at the top of his lungs and kicking with all his might. However, his efforts to free himself proved to be fruitless. Whoever this kidnapper was, they seemed to be made of solid steel, and could pick him up and toss him about without breaking a single sweat. After screaming his voice hoarse and bonking his toes enough times against his kidnapper’s iron chest to make them sting, Tommy had finally relented out of exhaustion and allowed himself to be carried.

“I didn’t kidnap you!” His kidnapper replied. The voice was male, gentle and unassuming. “I’m saving you.”

“Wha— *How?* You put me in a sack!”

“So you wouldn’t run away. Traumatized children tend to do that, you know.”

“You’re a bitch,” Tommy mumbled. “Put me down.”

“ *Put me down!* ” A tiny voice mimicked. “ *Put me down!* ”

Tommy tried to open his wings, but the sack that covered him from head to knee was too tight to do any more than wriggle about pitifully. “Stop mocking me! I don’t like you!”

“That’s not me!” His kidnapper chuckled, as if it were obvious. “That’s Foolish Jr. He’s my adopted son.”

A weight landed on Tommy’s back and pecked at the back of his head. The image of the strange bird-like creature flashed in Tommy’s mind. “What do you mean, your son?”

“You know how you have a dad? I’m *his* dad. But technically someone else made him, so I’m his adoptive dad.”

“I’m adopted too,” Tommy blurted.

“No, silly boy,” the kidnapper said. “I’m not *your* dad. I’m Foolish Jr.’s dad. If you were my son, you’d also be named Foolish Jr., because I am Foolish.”

“You sure are foolish, you stupid son of a bitch!” Tommy kicked his legs up once more, sending Foolish Jr. fluttering off his back with a metallic squawk. “Put me down right now or I’ll piss all over you!”

“Whoa! That’s gross.” Tommy’s kidnapper paused and swung him off their shoulder with frightening ease. Tommy’s feet hit the ground and he crumpled immediately, kicking at the sack to get it off him. “Go pee over by that tree. I can’t let you go too far, but I’ll turn around and plug my ears so you can have some privacy.”

Tommy ripped the potato sack over his head and took a massive breath of fresh air. “Ugh, freedom!” He cried. The sun was high in the sky, blinding him for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the brightness. “Fuck you, man. Now I’m going to be scared of sacks for the rest of my —“

His voice died in his throat with a small squeak. Standing before him was a man made of solid gold. He was dressed in ornate robes with a cape that arched over his head like the open mouth of a shark, and his glimmering identical eyes were identical to those of the strange bird-thing that

settled on his shoulder. The most terrifying trident Tommy had ever seen was strapped to one side of the man's back, humming with energy like a tree about to be hit with lightning.

In all his endless eloquence, Tommy opened his mouth and said the first thing that came to mind. "You're *ugly* !"

The golden man shook his head with a gentle smile. "Nope! I'm made of solid gold. I've heard that's considered quite pretty."

Tommy scrambled to his feet and made his wings look as large as he could. "What the fuck! What are you?"

The odd golden bird-thing landed on the golden man's shoulder, whirring happily. "I'm Foolish!" The golden man said, grinning with a mouth of golden teeth. "And I'm a totem god!"

He gave a small bow, rustling his detailed robes. "I heard that you were in trouble and came to save you, because that's what totem gods do. They save people's lives." He reached a hand up into his hood and scratched at the back of his neck. "I'm not super good at that yet, but I'm learning. You are my second victim of saving!"

It was then that Tommy realized where he was. Though he swore they'd only been walking for an hour and a half at most, the forest around them unrecognizable. The trees were tall and twisted, covered in vines and leaves large enough to be dinner plates. There were bushes on the sandy ground sporting blooming flowers and tiny white berries. The air was warm, slightly balmy, and everything seemed to shine.

This isn't home, Tommy thought in awe. *This is like, the Aether or something. Maybe I suffocated to death in that stupid sack.*

"Where are we?" Tommy breathed.

"The land of the Undying," Foolish replied. "I live here."

"We were just in the Antarctic Empire a little while ago! How'd we get here so quickly?"

"Magic!" Foolish waved his hands dramatically. "I can do that!"

Tommy's head felt like it was spinning. "I think I'm going to shit myself."

"Oh no!" Foolish said seriously. "Let's get you to my home, then. I'll take good care of you and then rightfully return you to your dad."

In a single motion, Foolish grabbed Tommy under the armpits and hefted him onto his hip. "Everything will be alright, angry bird child. I have saved you."

He patted Tommy's head with a warm hand. His flesh felt like metal. "You're the one I need to be saved from," Tommy muttered, reaching over the man's shoulders to poke at the trident's tips with a finger. Foolish Jr. chirped at him and batted his hand away with his wings. "You and this stupid bird-bitch-thing."

"I saved you! You were kidnapped!" Foolish said. He began to walk again, studying the environment around them with intently focused eyes. "I'm surprised you are not super traumatized by that. Good for you."

"I wasn't kidnapped! You took me from my home!"

There was a form of a large building in the distance, flashing between the trees as they neared. Foolish paused for a moment. “Huh?”

Tommy cocked a finger back at his wings. “I’m prince Tommy of the Antarctic Empire. That’s why I was there when you kidnapped me. I live there.”

Foolish’s eyes widened and his mouth thinned into a small line. “You don’t live in... Manburg?”

Tommy felt his jaw hit the floor just as they broke the tree line, revealing the looming front of a temple stretching far into the horizon.

“You came to kidnap *Tubbo*? ”

Chapter End Notes

WOOHOO TIME TO START ANOTHER ACT

to all of y’all who guessed foolish: you right! Here is the dumb himbo demigod we all love. I can’t wait to explore him more >:)

lots of set up in this chappy, but fear not! Big fun times shall come soon! Thank you all who are coming along with me on this journey :D

my leggy hurts real bad bc I’m a dumb bitch so gimme clout to heal me pls thx
-Ophelia

The Temple

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m friends with Quackity now.”

Dream blinked. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Sapnap nodded. His cheeks were flushed in the biting air, the tips of his ears red. He leaned back in his saddled and sighed, kicking his feet from the stirrups. “He’s cool. Really funny when he wants to be. I guess that’s what happens when your whole job is to be friendly and entertaining.”

“He makes George laugh so hard he snorts,” Dream replied. “I’ve only ever heard him do it.”

“Fuck, he made *me* laugh until I snorted. It’s like he’s got a comedy book in his brain or something.”

Dream looked up at the darkened figure of the castle. The goggles he’d been given to hide his face had shaded lenses, which made everything seem dark and devoid of most colour. He hated them. “George needs someone to make him laugh. He gets so uptight about shit that he becomes a raging asshole with no sense of humour.”

“Have you ever made him laugh?”

Sapnap’s horse pushed past him, passing Dream and his mare in a lazy trot. “I mean, yeah,” Dream said. “Why does it matter?”

Sapnap didn’t turn around to reply. “It doesn’t. I was just wondering.”

Dream’s fingers were stiff, and the scarf pinned up over his nose had begun to grow wet and balmy with the moisture of his breath. Yet still, he didn’t want to go inside. *It feels like every time I see him I spiral more and more. I want to go back to when I had control over my own feelings, when the void wasn’t screaming my own worst fears back to me every time I closed my eyes.*

Dream poked Patches’ sides with his heels, pushing her into a slow walk. Sapnap, up ahead, began to whistle.

Sometimes, when he was alone in the knights’ quarters or hours deep into a night shift outside George’s room, Dream would do something stupid. Something he knew he shouldn’t be doing, and yet couldn’t seem to stop. *Knowing how you feel about me is both my worst nightmare and greatest dream.* Sapnap passed beneath a frost-covered tree and flicked a branch, sending glittering sparkles into the air. Dream closed his eyes; Patches knew where she was going anyway. *Sometimes I’ll pluck the knowledge that you have love for me out of my brain and sit with it, holding it in my hands, never bringing it too close. I’ll look it over like I would a decorative sword, examining it from every angle, trying to make sense of it. I never can, but trying intoxicates me anyway.*

Maybe this is the world finally giving me what I think I want, just so I can finally let go.

“Dream?”

“Yeah?” Dream didn’t open his eyes. Gods almighty, he needed more sleep.

“Quackity knows about you guys.”

That jolted Dream from his peaceful haze. “I’m not surprised,” he said curtly. “He’s George’s confidante.”

“You’re not mad?” Sapnap asked.

“Why would I be mad?”

Sapnap’s shoulders moved uncomfortably. “I don’t know.”

“Were you the one that told him, Sapnap?”

“Okay, I thought he already knew!” Sapnap twisted in his saddle, raising a hand defensively as Dream slumped forward into his horse’s mane in frustration. “How was I supposed to know that the king apparently has limits to what he tells his closest friend?”

Dream groaned aloud. “What did he say?”

Sapnap shrugged. “Nothing! George hadn’t told him anything!”

“Why are you even talking to Quackity about my business in the first place?” Dream said angrily. “Are you trying to get information or something?”

“Can you blame me for wanting to know more?” Sapnap cried. “You didn’t tell me anything about all this! I had to force it out of you!”

“Have you maybe considered that I don’t want to talk about it?” Dream hissed. *No. No. No. Stop talking, Sapnap.* “That I don’t want you knowing all my shit?”

“I *named* you! I’m the reason you are who you are!” Sapnap jabbed a finger at him. “I at least deserve to know about the things that are fucking you up and making you miserable!”

“I’m not miserable—“ Dream started.

Sapnap cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand. Their horses nickered nervously. “The night after we got home from Manburg, you made me wait to see you. After all the shit we’d been through together, I had to wait *hours* to know if you were alright.” He pointed to the castle. “And yet *he* waltzed right in and stayed the whole night right at your side. Explain that.”

The sour taste of guilt filled Dream’s mouth. “I didn’t let him in. Technoblade did.”

“Technoblade said you didn’t want visitors.”

“Is that what you’re mad about?” Dream forced out. “You think I favour him over you?”

Sapnap’s features fell into a steely coolness that felt frighteningly unfamiliar. “I know that there’s a difference in our relationship and the relationship you have with him. A big one.”

“He’s my king, Sapnap! Of course there’s a difference!”

“ *Enough with the king shit! You know that’s not what I mean!* ”

A moment of terse silence overtook them. Sapnap cleared his throat and reached up to pet the spot

between his horse's flattened ears. "I just want you to be honest with me, Dream. You're changing in ways I don't like, and I want to be able to help you." He looked up, and they locked eyes. For the first time, Dream was glad he had his goggles on. "If you have feelings for him, even ones you don't fully understand, I want to know. I'll tell nobody. I won't even mention it to you. It'll be like nobody knows."

Nobody can know. I'm fucked the second I speak it into existence.

Sapnap's face momentarily softened. "Please, Dream. Don't lie to me anymore."

You've put me into the worst position I could be in. There's no painless answer for me.

"I—" Dream's voice didn't seem to work when he tried to speak. "I don't know. I don't know."

Seeing the hurt bloom in Sapnap's eyes forced two final words out of Dream's mouth before his throat closed. "I'm scared."

Please say that's clear enough for you.

Sapnap didn't reply for a moment. To Dream's relief, his voice was gentle when he finally did. "Why don't we get something to eat? You look like you need it."

"Okay," Dream whispered. Relief and fear battled in the cavern of his chest, nauseating and comforting all at once. *You know, now. You get it.*

Sapnap closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Sounds good, man. We should eat before Phil sends us off somewhere to find Tommy."

"I love you, dude. I'm sorry."

"You're an idiot," Sapnap said with a small smile. "But I love you too. Thanks for telling me the truth."

This is real. I can't escape it. Dream watched as Sapnap kicked his horse into a canter and sped off in the direction of the castle. *There's a leak in the wall now. It'll all come down at some point.*

The thought of that terrified Dream more than anything.

~

"You're not the prince who was kidnapped?"

Tommy threw his hands into his hair. "That happened, like, two weeks ago! We already saved Tubbo!"

Foolish's face twisted. "Dang it!" He wailed, throwing his trident into the sand. "I got it wrong!"

"Tubbo doesn't even have wings! He has horns!" Tommy continued. "You know, like King Schlatt? His dad?"

"I didn't know what he looked like!" Foolish kicked his toe into the sand. "I thought I'd recognize him when I saw him. Didn't think there would be so many sad, pitiful little princes strewn about all over the country."

"Pitiful? Oh, *you* —" Tommy advanced in a huff and threw a punch to Foolish's side. Unsurprisingly, punching solid gold hurt. "I am not pitiful! You're just a stupid bitch!"

“You are a mean little feather-ball,” Foolish said with a scrunch of his nose. “I wish I’d have taken your friend.”

“Stop blabbering and take me home!” Tommy whirled around and gestured wildly in the direction they’d came. “Do your weird magic-thingy and bring me back before my dad realizes I’m gone and shits his pants!”

“Give me a second, small man! I’m tired. Travelling isn’t easy when you have precious cargo.” Foolish yanked his trident from the sand and pointed it in the direction of the massive temple that loomed before them. “Let’s go home for a little while. I can show you all my friends!”

“You have friends?” Tommy asked.

“Once again, you are a mean little feather-ball. Yes, I *do* have friends. And a son, which you certainly don’t have. So there.” Foolish stuck his tongue out. Unsurprisingly, it was golden too. “My house is actually super cool, so prepare to be impressed.”

“I won’t be.” Tommy crossed his arms. “It’s probably just as stupid as you are. And as ugly.”

“Your castle looked like a box with a bunch of little boxes on it. I could make a better one in a week.”

“No you couldn’t, idiot.”

“My house is cooler than yours.”

“No it’s not, bitch.”

Perhaps Tommy had been wrong on that front. Foolish’s property was *massive*, ornate in every sense of the word Tommy knew. They walked up a sandstone staircase as wide as Tommy’s whole room, then between two house-sized pillars emblazoned with the twisty insignia foolish bore on his sleeves and hems, stopping only once to let Tommy reluctantly marvel in the glory of the courtyard enclosed within the golden walls.

“Mmhmm?” Foolish said with a smirk.

Tommy batted Foolish Jr. off his shoulder as the creature chirped smugly into his ear. “It’s a temple. Big deal.”

The temple’s main building was a large pyramid, gleaming under the high sun. A single stream of light stretched out of the pyramid’s tip, beaming past the couple clouds in the sky. “A beacon!” Tommy exclaimed without thinking.

“Yeah!” Foolish said proudly. “Told you I was cool.”

“But—“ Tommy whirled back around— “How? How’d you get the star?”

The star. It was hardly a star; Tommy barely understood why such a frightening thing has such a pretty name. From the pictures Tommy had seen in the scary book he’d once stolen from his father’s office, the nether star was a mass of pulsing veins and flesh within the wither beast’s chest, so poison-laden that touching it with a bare hand could singe the flesh down to the bone. When exposed to air, it crystallized into a pointy whitish clump no bigger than Tommy’s palm. How such a thing could create a beam of light strong enough to light up the Aether was a question far beyond Tommy’s knowledge. Though Tommy had never been in the presence of one before, he’d heard that being close to one could make a person run faster or have the strength to mine for days straight

without a break.

Foolish laid a hand on his shoulder, startling him. "I've done my fair share of tooting about in the nether. Withers are no match for me."

Holy fuck. This guy's a lot more powerful than I thought. Tommy tried to keep his face calm as he turned back to meet Foolish's self-satisfied gaze. "Alright, fine. You're kind of cool, but only because of the beacon. You have to let me touch it at least once before you take me home."

"Deal." Foolish looked incredibly pleased with himself. "I told you I was cool."

"You just said that," Tommy mumbled.

"Don't care. I'm too cool for that."

Tommy scowled to himself. *I should have kept my mouth shut. This is what I get for being nice to people.*

"So, question," Foolish said, tapping Tommy's back with his trident to push him into walking again. "What do I feed you children creatures? Foolish Jr. doesn't eat anything, so I have little experience in feeding things other than myself."

"I like sour-berry tarts, but only the kind with frosting on top," Tommy said. "And don't bring me anywhere near mushroom stew or I'll barf on you."

"I don't have either of those." Foolish slammed his trident into the sand as they neared the pyramid's entrance. As if by magic, some of the sandstone bricks began to retreat into each other, opening a large doorway. "Would you be open to trying cactus?"

"Cactus? You can eat that?" Tommy asked wondrously.

"Course you can! If you like sour berries, you'll kill for cactus fruits. They're super yummy."

They passed through the doorway, Foolish ducking slightly as to not hit his head on the low ceiling. The pyramid's interior was lavish, with a single curved staircase leading upwards to what must have been Foolish's bedroom. The walls were covered corner-to-corner with bookcases, brightly-coloured vines, and all kinds of strange knick-knacks that Tommy was desperate to touch. However, once Tommy had sufficiently hidden his excitement and turned around with an insult ready on his tongue, he found Foolish frozen in place a step or two behind him, mouth set into a hard line.

"What's the matter?" Tommy said.

"Something's not right," Foolish said in a low voice. "My things have been moved."

Tommy gave the room a once-over and gulped. "What do you mean?"

"It means someone's in here and they shouldn't be." Foolish extended his arm to allow a bristling Foolish Jr. to hop on. He passed Tommy in two long strides then paused again, staring upwards at the ceiling. "Stay close."

Tommy forced his frozen legs into motion and darted to Foolish's side as he began to walk forward with his trident at the ready, wrapping his wings around his chest and arms. Foolish moved slowly but with surprising grace, as light and silent on his feet as Technoblade was. They had just crested the staircase when the air went suddenly thin and silent, void of a thick buzzing Tommy hadn't

even realized was there before it was gone. The effect on Foolish was instantaneous.

“My beacon!”

He was gone in a blur of gold, leaving Tommy to sprint behind him in a half-blind panic.

“Foolish!” Tommy cried. He reached the top of the staircase and kicked himself off the ground, shooting upwards until he hit the vine-covered ceiling. Foolish darted up another set of curved stairs, teeth bared and trident raised, and Tommy soared down and had just landed on one of the sandstone steps when a massive *bang* rang out from the room above him.

“Get away from that!”

Something made a high-pitched screaming noise — Foolish Jr, probably — and another deafening *bang* rattled the pyramid’s walls. Crouched low to the ground with his heart hammering in his ears, Tommy poked his head over the final step.

The room seemed to be the very top of the pyramid, with a glass skylight hammered into the ceiling at the peak. A gleaming emerald pyramid stood in the middle, covered in writhing, thorny vines. In one of the back corners, cowering under the points of Foolish’s trident, was a dirt-covered girl bearing a wild snarl. A small glass box lay abandoned a few feet away. *The beacon!*

The girl’s eyes landed on Tommy as he stood frozen at the top of the stairs. Her face split into a smile, her teeth starkly white against her filthy skin. Out of nowhere, Tommy’s feet were ripped out from under him. He crumpled to the floor and shrieked as a sharp pain consumed one of his feet. One of the vines had latched itself onto his ankle, sinking several thumbnail-sized thorns into his flesh. As if it had a mind of its own, the vine went taut and began to pull him towards the girl’s corner.

“No!”

The middle point of Foolish’s trident came down hard upon the vine, severing it with a wet *thud*. Immediately, the vine went loose and unravelled, pulling the thorns from Tommy’s skin. In the brief moment of Foolish’s distraction, the dirt-covered girl skittered between them on all fours and disappeared down the small staircase. Foolish ran after her, yelling curses, but returned a moment later defeatedly. “She got away,” he said. “She must have ended pearls.”

He gingerly picked the beacon up off the floor and tucked it beneath one of his arms, wiping a smudge from the glass. With his free hand, Foolish tugged some of the vines — on which massive red roses had begun to flower — off the small emerald pyramid and placed the beacon back on the top. Within moments, the beacon roared to life, filling the air with a thick, buzzing energy. Tommy felt the back of his neck tingle. *Cool.*

“Thank the gods that she didn’t get away with my beacon,” Foolish said, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. “That would have been really bad.”

“Who was that?” Tommy replied. “She was all dirty and shit.”

“No idea. Probably a rabid forest spirit or something, given these.” Foolish crushed another vine beneath his foot. “She’s certainly not from the land of the Undying. I know every creature from border to border.”

“Weird.” A shiver up Tommy’s spine. He tried to stand, but found his scraped-up ankle too sensitive to put any weight on. “Can you take me home now?”

“Certainly not! I can’t leave my temple after something like this!” Foolish cried. “What if more

crazy dirt people show up and try to steal my stuff? I have *really* important stuff in here!”

Tommy’s jaw fell open. “My dad doesn’t know I’m here! He’s going to think I was murdered!”

“You can write him a letter!” Foolish said. “Just tell him I’m very very sorry for accidentally stealing his mean little bird son and to not murder me. That work?”

“Oh—“ Tommy fell into a crouch, pressing his eyes into his kneecaps. His injured foot stung. “You’ll have to do it. I can’t write.”

“You can’t write? Aren’t you like, at least six or something?”

“Shut up!” Tommy shouted. “I’ve been learning for years. My brain doesn’t like it, so I can’t ever remember how to write all the letters and how things are spelt. That’s why my friend Ranboo writes stuff for me.”

“Well, you’re out of luck, then. I can’t write either. Not in your language, at least.” Foolish shrugged. “It’ll only be for a couple days while I work on security, okay? You can still send him a letter with, like, a drawn picture or something. So he knows you’re safe.”

“This is the worst day of my life,” Tommy moaned, falling rather dramatically into a little ball. “My dad is going to kill me for getting kidnapped.”

Foolish didn’t say anything for a moment. Tommy heard his footsteps come closer, then felt a hand pat his back. “Would some cactus make you feel better?” Foolish asked at a low whisper, his voice earnest and worried.

“It would, actually,” Tommy said. “Feed me, please.”

Foolish raised himself to his feet again, smiling triumphantly. “I am the best child-carer,” he said to Foolish Jr., who sat upon his shoulder. “Come on then, small boy. I’ll show you all the goods.”

“Can I have a bandage too? I was gruesomely attacked by a weird dirt lady and now I’m bleeding all over your floor.”

“Yuck!” Foolish clapped his hands. “I don’t like child blood on my floor. Let’s get you fixed up.”

Sorry, Dad. Tommy closed his eyes and allowed Foolish to scoop him into his arms. *Guess I’m having an impromptu vacation.*

~

“Could you please sit down, Phil?”

Phil responded with a mere grunt and a sharp wave of his hand, making George frown. “You need to eat.”

“Forgive me for not having much of an appetite,” Phil hissed, though he picked up a piece of bread as he passed the dining table again and took a hasty bite.

The spiced sauce on the meat George had in his mouth made a cut in his lip sting. It was tasty, though, so he couldn’t bring himself to care much for the pain. “You can’t exhaust yourself waiting for this letter. Who knows how long it’ll take for the Eretians to get back to us.”

“It won’t take long. I know it won’t.” Phil dragged his chair back out and collapsed into it, putting his head into his hands. “If they have Tommy, they’ll want me to know. That’s the game they

play.”

“Still. It’ll be a day at least. Try and breathe.”

Across the table from him, Dream sat hunched over his plate, pushing pieces of meat around his plate with his fork. Sapnap was the only one out of the four of them who seemed to be actually eating, but even his shoulders were weighed down by concern.

Dream looks like he’s about to pass out, George thought, watching him shove a piece of meat under the bandana over his nose and mouth. I should have forced him to stay inside. Phil knows he’s going to need him to help find Tommy, and he can’t do shit when he’s as sick as a dog.

“How are Wilbur and Techno?” He asked. “Do you think they’ll be going with the search patrols?”

“Techno, certainly. Wilbur...” Phil pinched the bridge of his nose. “Wilbur wants to come. Whether or not it’s safe to bring him is another issue.”

“He’s seventeen,” Dream mumbled.

“So are many of your knights. You’d already seen your fair share of danger at even younger than that,” Phil replied tiredly. “He’ll call me a hypocrite if I didn’t let him come because of his age.”

“He’s a prince,” Dream continued. “Therefore he’s in more danger than a normal seventeen-year-old. Give him a taste of kingdom and have him hold down the fort here.”

“Any other day, he’d be happy enough doing that.” Phil leaned back in his chair, catching his greying hairs in the light. “But anything having to do with Tommy lights a fire under his ass. He’s never been scared for his brother’s safety like this before. He’s desperate.”

Phil took another bite of his bread and his face twisted as though he were tasting mould. “As much as it goes against everything I’ve wanted since you all arrived, I want you to go out and help me find him.”

“We would have snuck out again if you’d told us no,” Dream said with a hint of humour. “So thanks for making it easy on us.”

Phil chuckled, but the sound was hollow. “I figured.”

There came a sharp rapping at the door. Phil stood so abruptly he yanked the tablecloth with him, sending several glasses clattering to the floor. For a moment, he seemed suspended in place, fear blazing in his eyes. “Come in!”

A servant walked in, holding a familiar envelope. George’s stomach sunk. Phil’s face lost all colour. “Thank you,” he said stiffly, practically ripping it from the wide-eyed servant’s hands. “You may go.”

He collapsed back into his chair, looking green. “Already?” He breathed. “Oh gods, please...”

He tore it open with his hands and unfurled the small piece of paper, his hands shaking as though he were handling a venomous snake. It only took a moment of reading for Phil’s face to twist in despair. He slammed his hand down on the table, gritting his teeth. “Fuck,” he said as George pulled the paper from his fingers and read it. “What have I done? What have I done?”

A hand rested on George’s shoulder and he grabbed it without thinking, squeezing it tightly. “*Did you take Tommy?*” George remembered Phil speaking aloud as he scribbled his fear into the paper

earlier that morning. *“Do you have my son?”*

“My gods,” Dream murmured. His hand was warm, grounding — the only comfort that broke through the wave of terror descending onto George’s shoulders.

In neat, cursive scrawl, the letter bore five words.

And what if we did?

Chapter End Notes

i ain’t never seen a Hannah rose stream before, but u know what everyone deserves a feral moment in their lives good for her

Happy April fools! I have been chuckling all day at your fear because I am mean. As I enter into my last weeks of my second year at uni, I need clout more than ever to stay alive! Please shower me in attention please and thanks <3

I’m so happy y’all r liking foolish! He’s really fun to write. It’s absolutely insane to see so many people coming back here every week excited for a new chapter. I cannot explain how genuinely grateful I am that people are enjoying what I create. Writing fanfic has saved my mental health in this awful pandemic, and I cannot thank you all enough! I shall continue to provide the goods ☺

-Ophelia

The Totem

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Desperation hung heavy over their heads in the following days. The Eretians went silent, cutting off all communication between them and Phil. They began to refuse his letters, turn away the flood of messengers that arrived at their borders. No matter what Phil offered to give them, they wouldn't even mention Tommy or his whereabouts.

George wasn't sure whether it was their sadism or their dedication to silence that astounded him the most.

Phil fell into despair almost immediately, dragging the mood of the castle down with him. Though he was never cruel to the couple servants that dared to bring him food and tried to comfort Wilbur when he'd creep in during their meetings with tear-filled eyes, the frenzied panic that clung to him like the spray of a skunk had every castle inhabitant walking on eggshells. Worry filled the hallways like a thick smoke, snuffing the life out of any sense of peace that remained within the walls, and terror began to manifest in every shadowed corner with each passing hour. George saw nothing of Tubbo and Ranboo, safe for the times Tubbo would barrel down the hallways at night in a half-asleep stupor, screaming nonsense, leaving Ranboo to scoop him up into his arms and dart away. Wilbur and Techno remained by their father's side, trying their best to alleviate his pain. But the task proved too great for them, and they too succumbed to their misery.

Perhaps that was how George found himself in the barren castle garden, staring up at the titanic tree that stretched outwards in every direction over his head. Snowflakes drifted between the naked, twisting branches and landed on his eyelids and nose. Though he'd worn Bad's blue cape and had it wrapped as tightly around himself as he could, his body held a bitter chill.

"Your Highness?"

Dream moved into his peripheral vision, a stark green blur against the sallow whites and blues around them. He held a scarf in his hands. "You're cold."

He wasn't wrong, but George waved him away nonetheless. *I don't have the energy to deal with you right now.* "It's fine. I just needed a breather."

"You can have a breather without freezing to death," Dream replied.

George licked his lips. "It's only for a moment. Leave me be."

Dream made a small noise of disapproval and made no move to leave. Sighing, George closed his eyes and tried to relish in the howling wind. "Anything is better than the castle," George murmured.

A scarf landed over his neck and nose. "Yeah," Dream said from behind him, tucking the scarf's fine ends into the neck of his cape. "I don't blame you for wanting a break."

"Phil's cracking." An icy shiver ran up George's spine. "Tommy doesn't make it home, he'll..."

The words felt too sour on his tongue to speak aloud, so George allowed his words to die off and be carried away on the breeze. "Don't talk like that," Dream said gently. "We'll get him home in one piece."

“Dream, you heard what the ram woman said back at Manburg.” George turned his head and met Dream’s eye, raising his shoulders in a defeated shrug. “They don’t take prisoners.”

“That doesn’t mean—“

“Phil and his family have already begun to process their grief. They can’t let the Eretians torture them into submission,” George said. “There’s only so much we can do to save Tommy.”

Though his eyes were mostly hidden behind the thick set of blacksmith goggles he wore, Dream’s eyebrows visibly furrowed. “I say we storm those bastards and raze them to the ground for what they’re pulling.”

“Yeah, like that’s possible. What a great way to get Tommy horrifically murdered for sure.” Techno’s dark figure flew from one of the castle’s highest windows and made a high arc above their heads. George watched his blurry form disappear around the other side of the castle. *His wingspan is even larger than his dad’s. Were his birth parents giants or something?* He wondered idly. *I’m not surprised he managed to beat Dream in a duel.*

The memory brought a lifeless chuckle to his lips before he could stop it. “I really think you should go inside,” Dream said. “You’re going crazy out here.”

“I’m going crazy in there, too.” George ran a hand through his damp hair. His fingertips had begun to ache. “How are you?”

The question seemed to surprise Dream. “Me?” He said.

“Who else? The wind?”

Dream turned away, bringing his gloved hands up to tug at the bandana pinned over his nose. “I’m okay. Think I’m finally poison-free, at least. Thank the gods.”

“Good. Are you sleeping well?”

Dream had taken to sleeping in the knights’ quarters with Sapnap rather than in the small guest bedroom like before. He’d stopped doing his night shifts outside George’s door too. *I need your presence close now more than ever.* George’s tongue grew heavy in his mouth. *But asking seems to be out of the question right now.*

“That could be better. The knights’ quarters are always so loud at night. I’ve never liked sleeping with a bunch of other people,” Dream said. “Sapnap snores like a dying ghost.”

George’s heavy tongue moved with a mind of its own. “There’s always the spare within my rooms if you ever need it.” *So much for not asking. The hypothermia must be making me bold.* “Only if you’re comfortable, though. I’d understand if not.”

Dream paused as if pondering, but it was difficult to read his expression with so much of his face hidden. *I used to know you. The second I saw your face, I could read you like a book.* George scanned the gentle shapes of his face, searching for a familiar crinkle of his eyes or quirk in the bandana’s fabric that could have been a smile. Nothing. *Now I feel like you’ve shut me out completely again.*

“I’m not sure if I can do that,” Dream finally said. “But I’d be happy to guard your doors at night if that would give you peace.”

The sting of his words hit George’s chest as hot and sharp as the blade of a newly-minted axe.

“No,” he replied. “I want you getting sleep. This isn’t about me.”

“I sleep fine. I just need, like, earplugs or something. Or to give Sapnap a new nose.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” George outstretched his hand and watched the snowflakes gather in his palm. The gash he’d once feared would split his hand straight open was no more than a thin, scabby line that tingled with every snowflake that landed upon it. George was sure he’d be thanking Technoblade and his healing potions until the day he died. “I promise I’ll be back within the next quarter of an hour. Could you go check on Tubbo and Ranboo for me?”

“Already ahead of you. They’re with Technoblade, trying to keep themselves useful. And sane, probably,” Dream said. “So you can’t get rid of me that easy.”

“I wasn’t trying—” George frowned. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, I do.” Dream’s voice softened, making George’s heart climb up into his throat. “Could I make a request?”

“A request?” George said.

“Yeah. I can do that, since we’re equals now.” Dream let out a chuckle. “Want to read to me again? I figure we can use the distraction while you and Phil figure out battle plans.”

When George didn’t answer immediately, Dream stuck the toe of his boot into the snow and shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve also forgotten a lot of what you taught me.”

“Is this all just one long-winded plan to get me inside?” George asked, unable to fight the tired smile that crept onto his face.

“Oh, come on. I’m not that crafty.” Dream lifted the goggles off his face for a quick moment, letting George see his crinkled, shining eyes. “But I’ll take the credit if it works.”

George’s grip on the hems of his cape loosened and the material billowed out behind him, taken airborne by a icy gust of wind. The cold hit his bones like a landing arrow. He breathed in, feeling his blood go frosty.

The fire within his ribcage burned hot and bright.

“Fine,” he said. “You win. Take me inside.”

~

The sand beneath Tommy’s feet burned between his toes. Wiping sweat from his brow, he looked up at the sun arcing over the pyramid’s peak in a blazing, golden ball and grinned.

This is so fucking awesome.

Life in the Land of the Undying was possibly the coolest thing Tommy had ever experienced in his entire life. If there was any possible way to become a demi-god, he was sure he’d find out how and do it. Kinghood be damned; Tommy wanted *magic*.

He hadn’t heard anything from his father yet. Foolish had helped him draft up a little picture with some of the coloured paints he had lying around. ‘Undying’ was a little hard to spell out, but Tommy tried his best anyway and prayed the pyramid, green trees, and smiling Tommy stick-figure would give his dad enough of an idea of where he was. Days had passed since then with no

response at all. Irrksome, sure, but Tommy wasn't necessarily biting at the bit to get home anymore.

Alright; he *really* didn't want to go home anymore.

Foolish Jr. landed on his shoulder, chirping. Tommy bumped his nose against the creature's head, laughing as it nuzzled back into his cheek. "I can't believe picking weeds out of the ground is this fun. I definitely have to be on drugs or something. Big drugs."

"*Drugs!*" Foolish Jr. replied happily.

"Oh, you know it, little man." Tommy drove his shovel into the sand and ripped up another thorny vine. It shrivelled immediately, leaving nothing but ash in its place. The temple had been crawling with them since they'd scared off the dirt-covered girl, and Foolish didn't take too kindly to having weeds all over his property. So, after a hearty breakfast of cactus fruits, Foolish sent him out into the sun with nothing but a shovel and told him to get to work.

"I'm like a slave, you know. Except I'm not, because I want to be doing this." Tommy opened his wings and launched himself into the air, landing just before another vine hidden behind the stump of a lush tree. "I know how to spell slave. S-L-A-V." He ripped up another vine with ease. "I think that's how it's spelt, at least."

Foolish Jr. did not reply. Tommy could only assume it was an agreement.

A rippling shadow soared above his head, catching on the sunlight as it landed beside him in a cloud of sand. "Tommy!" Foolish exclaimed, gripping his trident in a white-knuckled. "Go back to the pyramid. I'll need you to guard it while I go do something."

"Guard the pyramid?" Tommy gaped. "Why?"

"I need to go do something really important and time-sensitive. I doubt anything will happen; I just want someone there, okay?"

"Can I use your trident?"

Foolish lifted it over his head as Tommy went to grab it. "Absolutely not! Only I can handle my trident. It's far too powerful for you." He pointed back to the pyramid and poked at Tommy's back with his free hand. "I left a couple weapon things up by the beacon if you want to look at them. If things get real bad, then fly away with Foolish Jr. until I get back. Got it?"

Tommy opened his wings, but his brain was spinning trying to make sense of his sudden task. "Huh?"

Foolish ruffled his hair and smiled. "I knew I could trust you! I won't be gone longer than ten minutes. See you soon!"

He raised his trident over his head and launched himself into the air without another word, leaving Tommy standing alone in a mist of water droplets and sandy air. A burst of excitement hit his chest. *I get to guard the pyramid!*

"Come on!" He grabbed Foolish Jr. in both hands and pulled him to his chest. "Let's go be guards!"

Foolish hadn't been lying when he'd said he'd left weapons for him. A sizeable sword and shield lay up against the emerald beacon, more colourful than any weapon Tommy had ever seen in his

entire life. Even Dream's axes were nowhere near as pretty. "It's like everything's cool here!" Tommy said to Foolish Jr. with a grin. He picked up the sword and swung it around dramatically, admiring himself in the shield's reflective surface. Though the sword was as long as his whole wing and nearly heavy enough to topple him over, Tommy spent the next couple minutes in a gleeful haze, fighting invisible enemies until his muscles burned. *I never want to leave*, he decided, pretending he was slicing through an Eretian's chest. *I never, ever, want to leave.*

So engrossed in his fun, he didn't notice Foolish's return until Foolish scaled the small staircase into the beacon's chamber. "Someone stole something from downstairs!" He shrieked.

Tommy froze, dropping the sword to the ground with an an echoing clatter. Fuck. "Oh, I—"

"Kidding," Foolish replied with a cheeky grin. He leaned his trident against the wall. "Scared you."

"Dickhead." Tommy collapsed to the ground in relief, panting. His arm muscles burned like never before. "Get your errand done?"

Foolish's face fell. "Yeah," he said with a small sigh. "Yeah, I did."

Something glimmered in his hand. It was a small golden figure, a near replica of Foolish Jr. without some of the detail on its wings. "What's that?" Tommy asked as Foolish sat down in front of him, cradling the strange item in his hands.

"What do you know about life and death, Tommy?"

Tommy raised an eyebrow. Foolish stared down at the item in his hands, his emerald eyes dull and listless. "I, uh—" Tommy paused to think— "Like, I know what they are. And how to die, and stuff. But, uh, not sure if that's what you're looking for."

"Totem gods have a special job, Tommy. We're protectors. Of these." Foolish set the item down between them. "You can touch it, but be gentle."

The item was warm beneath Tommy's fingers as he picked it up gingerly. "What is it?"

"A totem of undying."

Tommy shook his head. "Never heard of those."

"I bet your dad would. These guys are... useful. Especially for people who don't like to die."

Tommy turned it over in his hands. "Looks like Foolish Jr.."

That made Foolish smile. "Foolish Jr. is one. I brought him to life myself."

"You can do that?"

"Not usually. It was pretty tough to pull off."

Foolish reached forward and gently pulled it from Tommy's fingers. "Life and death have to exist in a balance. People die, and people are born. That keeps the balance, well, balanced, and all is well in the world," he said. "But sometimes, death gets a little too greedy in some moments and takes more of its share than it should."

"Like in war," Tommy added.

“Smart kid. War, plague, famine, fire. In any place where there’s a lot of death all at once, you get these boys,” Foolish continued. “I don’t really know how they show up or where they come from, but they’re always there when I go looking.”

“How many do you have?”

“Not many. I don’t like keeping too many in my pyramid. Attracts a lot of bad guys.”

Tommy tilted his head. “So they’re like a healing potion?”

“Better than that. These things are life, made from death. They’ll bring you back from the dead.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Yeah,” Foolish nodded. “But only if you die holding one of them. You can’t just go chucking them on corpses and bringing them back. That would be really scary and gross.”

“That’s so cool!” Tommy exclaimed. “Gods, I love it here! Everything is awesome!”

He fell back onto his back, fluttering his wings excitedly. Foolish let out an empty chuckle. “Oh, you get used to it all after a while, man.”

“What do you do with them once you get them?” Tommy rolled onto his side, perching his chin on his fist. “Who gets to cheat death?”

Foolish drew a small roll of cloth from one of his robe’s pockets and began to wrap the totem with gentle hands. “Nobody, ideally. We totem gods keep them away from people. They’re dangerous.”

Tommy froze. “Dangerous? They can save lives!”

“It’s not that simple. Being revived can really mess a person up.”

“You could be saving people with these! You could have saved King George’s dad! And you all just let them go to waste?”

“Nobody should be cheating death, Tommy,” Foolish pursed his lips. “People are meant to die when it is their time. We have to keep the balance in check, remember?”

“That’s bullshit! Tubbo’s dad could have been helped with one of those! He would still be here!”

Foolish’s eyes widened. “King Schlatt is dead?”

“Yeah,” Tommy snapped. “For weeks now. Maybe he wouldn’t be if he’d had one of those.”

Foolish looked down at the floor and seemed to swallow whatever words he had on his tongue.

“I’ve let you in on a really big secret, featherball. The less people who know about these totems, the better. You wouldn’t believe what some people would do to get their hands on one of these bad boys.”

Tommy scowled and pushed himself back into a sitting position, pulling his knees to his chest. “Crimes?” He muttered.

“Crimes,” Foolish replied, nodding. “And we can’t have that. So I’m trusting you to keep my secret.”

“I’ll keep your secret,” Tommy said, “On one condition.”

“Oh?” Foolish raised an eyebrow. “And that is?”

“You let me use your trident.”

Foolish’s somber face split into a wide grin. “You are a sneaky little boy! I feel like I’m being extorted.”

“You are, bitch!” Tommy rose to his feet. “Let me use it or else!”

He opened his wings and fluffed them to look as big as possible. Chuckling to himself, Foolish raised his hands in defeat. “Fine. But only once, and you have to use gloves! This thing is powerful, little man. Do one thing wrong and you’ll be blown to little feathery smithereens.”

“Keep the totem on us! Then I’ll have nothing to worry about!” Tommy grinned. His veins tingled with excitement.

Foolish slipped the totem back into his robes and fetched his trident from the far wall. It gleamed in the beacon’s gentle light, humming as if it were bursting with life.

“You ever taste lightning, Tommy?”

~

Reading to Dream was a lot, lot harder than George remembered.

They’d taken up at one of the empty dining tables in one of the upstairs parlours, George having internally deemed reading in his own bedroom too intimate of an endeavour. They hadn’t read together since their rescue mission for Tubbo, and the dynamic between them had shifted so drastically that George felt like he was back at square one, trying to make sense of a man he believed hated his guts.

But Dream didn’t hate his guts, and George knew that.

That only made it all the more difficult.

“Through the smoke and the noise and the agony of his body burning away, Cletus raised his hand above his head and threw the book into Isaac’s open hands. “Go!” He screamed, the edges of his vision beginning to fade away. In his final moment of lucidity, he fell back through the branches —“

Dream banged his fists on the table. “He’s *dead*?”

George lowered the book from his face. “Yup.”

“What the fuck? I thought this book was for kids!”

George let out a snort. “It’s not for babies,” he said. “I read this when I was, like, fourteen or something.”

“Cletus just burned to death right in front of us! How did that not give you nightmares?” Dream leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m distressed. I’m actually upset. Ranbob was my favourite character!”

“I thought you said you liked the mysterious weirdos,” George said with a smile.

“I do! Not the maniacal murderers that kill off my second-favourite character. Those guys suck.”

This is good. This is nice. George pressed his nose to the inside of the book's spine and inhaled the dusty odour. *This is almost normal.*

"Do you want to stop and find another book?"

"Ugh, not now. I need to know what happens to the others." Dream crossed his arms. "You're a sick bastard for knowing what happens and still making me read it."

"Sorry for not knowing you're apparently a sensitive baby!" George replied.

"Well, then I guess you don't know all that much about me!"

Though Dream's voice was laced with humour, his words hit the air and went starkly sour, plunging them into silence. *You're right*, George thought, watching Dream shift awkwardly. *I barely know you at all.*

"Well, it's up to you show yourself to me, isn't it? I can't do all the work for you," George finally said, leaning back in his chair with feigned relaxation. "Not my fault you're a brick wall."

"Sorry," Dream mumbled.

"I'm sorry too."

He was thinking of Tommy again. *Fuck*, he shouldn't have been thinking about Tommy again. Tommy, who'd just begun to hit his growth spurt and would probably be taller than George by the time he was fourteen. Tommy, who'd had a wildfire for a personality since he was small enough to have a personality at all.

Tommy, who could be dead at that moment. Or suffering, wishing to be home.

"We've got no leads," George found himself whispering. "He could be anywhere."

"Who?" Said Dream. "Tommy?"

"If we invade one place, the Eretians will be hot on our tail and just keep moving him around until we exhaust ourselves. Our best chance of finding him is having them lead us right into a trap."

"George," Dream said softly. A warning.

George put his head in his hands. "I'm not sleeping well."

He'd barely been managing four hours a night since Tommy had dropped off the face of the earth. Between the nightmares, the restlessness, and the crushing guilt over resting when he could be doing something, sleep didn't come all that easy to him anymore.

Plus you're not there to make me feel safe.

Dream's body stiffened. He rose from his chair at the other end of the table, cocking his head as if he were scowling. "You should have told me sooner."

I was afraid you would think I was trying to manipulate you into my bed. To my side. Back into my life in a way you don't want to be anymore. "What were you going to do about it? Drug me?" George said.

"I can ask Technoblade if he has anything."

“You will do no such thing. He’s probably running himself to the bone trying to keep Phil and Wilbur intact.”

“Then I’ll start doing night shifts again. That way you can get me if you need something.”

“No.” The word ached to say. “You need your sleep. I can get one of the Antarctic guards to do it if I need to be guarded.”

Dream made a small grunt of disapproval and turned on his heel. He walked to the door, poked his head out, then pulled the doors shut. “I’m not doing this out of obligation,” he said, turning and leaning his back against the doors. “I’m coming to you as a friend.”

“And as a friend, I’m refusing,” George replied. “Your days of spending hours straight standing in one place are done.”

Dream reached up and pulled the bandana and goggles off his face. He was flushed, obviously troubled. There was a raised red line just above his eyebrows in the shape of the goggle’s lenses. “Can’t you just let me be worried about you? You know I’ll help!”

“You can help by keeping yourself in as good a state as you can do Phil can use you when he needs,” George said. The icy claws of anxiety began to prick their way up his spine.

“I want things to go back to normal!” Dream cried. “When you actually let me do my job and keep you in one piece!”

George gritted his teeth as a wave of hurt crashed over him. “We can’t go back to normal, Dream. I’ve fucked that up for the both of us.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I am okay! About as okay as I can be when a twelve year old is missing and possibly dead!”

“You said it yourself that there’s only so much we can do, George,” Dream said, raising his arms as if pleading. “Just let me help in the couple ways I can.”

I want to run into your arms and disappear, George thought dimly. “And those are?”

“Make you feel safe, give you stability. The stuff I used to do.”

“I don’t want you working yourself ragged—“

“I won’t! I promise I won’t.”

“No night shifts.”

“No night shifts,” Dream repeated dutifully. “I promise.”

Later that night, just as George’s restless mind began to quiet, the door to his bedroom creaked open to allow a single figure to slip through.

“It’s not technically a night shift,” Dream whispered as he slipped into the guest bedroom. “I’m sleeping in here and taking care of myself, so you can’t be mad.”

The door to the guest bedroom closed with a gentle click, leaving George with his heart pounding in his ears. Relief filled him, strong and warm, but he couldn’t shake the dread from the pit in his stomach.

You're making it so hard not to want you, he thought, listening to Dream's muffled sneeze from across the wall. You don't even realize you're torturing me.

For the first time in days, George slept until dawn. Dream was the one to shake him awake with a gentle but rather panicked hand. "George," he whispered. "George, we got a letter."

"From who?" George murmured.

"From Tommy. We think he's alive."

Chapter End Notes

try and find the Chekov's Gun in this chapter >:) hint: the one I'm talking about isn't the totem!

everyone who read AVOFI just shit their pants ksjfkfjf

OUUAAAGH my updates r getting so slow and I apologize!!! I wanted to keep them to one a week but I am,,, slacking ☹ exam season will be over soon pls send clout and good luck

also Dream rn: it's not gay if it's my job so let me tenderly care for you so I don't go actually insane

george, trying desperately to get over him: this has to be violating a Geneva Convention

Stay cheesin my friends

-Ophelia

Things to Find

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy's letter was interesting, to say the least.

"What does that even say?" George pointed to an illegibly-scrawled word at the top of the letter. It wasn't even a true letter, per say, but a sloppy, colourful drawing. Of what? George had no fucking clue.

"It says—" Phil pulled the yellowed paper close to his face and squinted. "Ending? Indiny?"

"That's not even a word," Wilbur whispered from over his shoulder.

"I know it's not." Phil slammed the drawing back into the desk. "Aether fucking almighty. That's certainly Tommy's writing, though."

"Is that a pyramid?" Dream said. "I see a triangle in the corner."

"I think I'm going to puke," Wilbur moaned. "This is some next-level sadism."

"It's something, Will." Phil grabbed his son's hand as he moved away from the table and gently tugged him closer. Wilbur had grown sallow in the days without his little brother, his grey wings listless and crinkled. Phil reached a hand up and rubbed Wilbur's cheek. "It means there's a chance he could still be alive."

"I wouldn't immediately trust it. This drawing is weird. Really weird," Dream said. "Can you read what he tried to write, Wilbur?"

"I tried," Wilbur replied. "But it's fucking chicken scratch. I'd say the Eretians probably broke his hands if that isn't how he always writes."

Across the room, Techno stood at the ceiling-high bookshelf, turned away from them with his face buried in a book. "Is it in pencil, charcoal, or paint?"

"Paint," Phil called back. "Looks like the ones you make from dust and shit."

"Cool." Techno flipped a page and landed on a map. *He seems calm*, George thought. But then again, this is Technoblade. *He's never been one to emote much at all.*

"Are there any pyramids around? Lush forests?" Dream asked. "Tommy painted in yellow and green. He's obviously nowhere near here."

"There are pyramids that exist in the world, yes," Phil said, leaning back in his chair with his wings folded around him like a shawl. "But they're on the other side of the continent. There's no way someone could have gotten Tommy there that quickly. It's impossible."

"Why would he draw it then?" Dream rubbed at his temple.

"The Eretians could have forced him to do it. Perhaps to throw us off? Confuse us? Lead us on a goose chase?"

"I think we're giving these assholes too much credit," George said. "This is too much effort, even

for King Eret. They're crafty, but not especially known for their patience. I seriously doubt they'd take the time to make a puzzle like this."

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose. "Good gods, it's hard to pin down what the Eretians will or will not do at any given moment. This is unusual for King Eret, but not out of the question."

"Tommy drew himself smiling. I think—" Dream squinted at the drawing and let out a tiny snort — "That's supposed to be a thumbs up, if I cross my eyes a little. Maybe it's a good sign?"

"I should have just taught him to write," Phil said gravelly. "Instead I let him coast and use his friend as a writing tool because I was exhausted. Now he couldn't write for help even if he tried."

"No sense in beating yourself up for it now, Phil," George replied. A breeze rattled outside, drawing Phil's eyes to the windows. Like the rest of them, he bore darkening bags beneath his bottom eyelashes. "What we need to focus on now is—"

Techno appeared over George's shoulder and abruptly pulled the drawing closer. "Undying," he said, giving the painted word a confident tap with his finger. "That's what he wrote."

Phil's head snapped back so quickly it made his crown slip sideways on his hair. "Undying? Are you sure?"

"Dead on. Tommy somehow found a way to get an 'E' in there, but that's almost certainly what it says."

"That's fucking morbid," Dream remarked. "What does it mean?"

"World map, Techno. Now." Phil's breath quickened. "George, give me that drawing."

George passed it to him, sneaking a surprised glance in Dream's direction as Techno then set an arm's length map on the table. "Undying," Phil murmured, mostly to himself. His finger skimmed the map from corner to corner, running over faded drawings of mountains and rivers and sprawling cities. George watched it travel south, past the thin mesa that made up the Badlands, to a small beige spot by the ocean. "The land of the Undying. That's where he's leading us."

"The what?" George leaned forward in his seat. "Is it a country?"

"Not exactly." Phil's finger moved upwards and to the left, landing on a similar beige spot father up on the map surrounded by a dark oak forest, then to one even farther North on an island. "It's not even one singular place at all. They're enchanted pocket deserts that sprout up all over the world," Phil said as he wiped his brow. "They house the totem gods, who travel around the world to collect and protect totems of undying."

His words sent a shockwave down George's spine. "I haven't heard of a totem of undying in years. I forgot they even existed."

"Good," Phil replied sharply. "Keep it that way. All they do is cause trouble."

"Why would Tommy be there?" Wilbur said with a worried frown. "Have the Eretians started taking over there, too?"

"For the love of all that's holy, I hope not. A totem-powered Eretian army could be devastating." Phil folded Tommy's drawing and slipped it into one of his robe pockets. "Perhaps he's been brought there as a bargaining chip. The Eretians would gladly trade him for a totem or two."

“So he’s alive?” Wilbur said hopefully.

“We can’t get our hopes up too much, but the situation is less abysmal than it was before. We may actually get him home.”

Phil sat back with a long breath and an invisible weight on his shoulders seemed to lighten. *He could still be alive*, George thought with an excited shiver. “What’s the plan now, then? Start sending letters to the totem gods of the country asking if they’ve been extorted lately?”

“Fuck that. I’m not wasting any time anymore. We’re leaving tonight.” Phil turned to Wilbur and pursed his lips into a thin frown. “All of us.”

Wilbur whooped, raising his hands above his head. “Don’t worry about the kingdom,” Phil continued. “I do, in fact, have cabinet members that are not my own sons. They’ll hold down things here and in Manburg for us.”

“How are we going to get there? Riding there would take months,” Dream said.

“Nether travel,” Phil replied. “On safe paths, so there’s no danger. We’ll take the nether highways to the Badlands for four days, then ride on the surface for another three. That should—” Phil traced a small path on the map with his pointer finger— “Get us straight to the land of the Undying. Quick and easy.”

George felt his mouth go sour at the mention of the nether. “How much time do we have to prepare?”

“We leave at sundown. We can re-group here after dinner. If you can bring Sapnap, Dream, I’d prefer it. He seems to be a strong rider.”

“The strongest,” Dream replied in a tight voice. *Not a fan of the nether either?* George thought with an inward chuckle. *This week will be fun.*

“In that case—” Phil thumped the table with both hands— “I formally adjourn this meeting. Get ready, get rested, and meet me back in here once you’ve had dinner.”

He straightened his spine and set his jaw. “We’re finding Tommy, boys. Dead or alive.”

~

Being told that he was going back to hell wasn’t as scary as it should have been.

I’m already there, Dream thought bitterly. *It can’t get that much worse.*

“Back to the nether, huh?”

Dream blinked. “Yeah,” he replied with a grunt. “We’ll be on the highways, though. So there won’t be any fortresses or blazes around, don’t worry.”

George kicked a pebble on the floor with the toe of his boot and watched it go clattering down the hall. “Yeah. Think you’ll be alright?”

“Of course I will. Don’t worry about that.”

“Don’t get defensive!” George exclaimed. “I don’t need to be barked at every time I dare care about your well-being.”

Dream scowled. *Dick. Dickhead. I hate you.* “Old habits die hard, okay? I’m trying.”

“I’m not too excited to be going back to that shithole either. Can we at least relate over that instead of fighting?”

“Fine. I relate to you. Happy?”

George rolled his eyes. “You’re in a snit today. Did you sleep alright?”

I had the best sleep I’ve had in weeks. “I don’t know. Yeah, I guess.” Dream stuck his hand under the bandana over his nose and itched at the corner of his lip. “And you?”

“A lot better. Thank you.” George’s voice quieted. “But you don’t need to sleep in there with me if you’re not comfortable. I can get Quackity to keep me company if needed.”

“I changed my mind. You sleep better when I’m there, so I’ll be there. End of story.”

George turned his face to the window and cracked his fingers. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“You aren’t, I promise. Besides,” Dream said. “We’ll be sleeping in sleeping bags for the next two weeks or so anyway. You’re stuck with me whether you like it or not.”

“Yeah.” George smiled, though his voice grew soft with weariness. “No rest for the wicked, I guess.”

They turned the corner in silence. A servant fluttered by over their heads, carrying a covered tray of food. “Hopefully that’s for Phil,” Dream said. “He needs to keep his energy up.”

George smiled softly. “Hopefully,” he echoed.

The bags beneath his eyes looked lighter. *You slept until dawn because I was there. I had to wake you,* Dream thought. *You were even in the same position you were in when I snuck in.*

A dull ache bloomed in his chest, as if a weed were growing between his ribs. Dream wanted nothing more than to reach down his throat and tear it straight out.

A muffled laugh drifted through the walls as they approached George’s rooms, followed by the hum of unintelligible voices from within. George cocked an eyebrow. “Someone’s in my room.”

“Sounds like Sapnap,” Dream said. He grabbed the handle and twisted it. The voices paused abruptly. “And someone else.”

He pushed it open and froze in his tracks. There, on George’s couch, sat Sapnap and Quackity.

Quackity was wearing his mask.

“Dream!” Sapnap jumped to his feet. His cheeks were flushed as though he’d been laughing. “Look what we got!”

He gestured to a set of netherite armour on a stand by the fireplace. *Dream’s* armour. His axes laid on the floor in a woollen sheet, gleaming in the light.

Quackity was wearing his mask.

There was a hand on his arm. “Dream?” George said gently. “Can you let me in?”

Dream's feet felt numb as he moved to the side, letting George move past him. Quackity practically tore the mask off his face and set it on the small table, laughing nervously. "I only had it on for a second. I just wanted to see if it was enchanted."

Dream took a step forward and Quackity recoiled into Sapnap's chest, his laughter reaching a panicked crescendo. "Whoa, dude. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Can you two give us a moment?" George piped up. "I think Dream wants to change."

"Great idea. We'll get breakfast." Sapnap grabbed Quackity by the arm and pushed him towards the door. His eyes were wide and anxious. "Tell me if anything's wrong with your armour, okay? I'll get it fixed for you."

Dream nodded. His tongue felt like a dry weight in his mouth. Sapnap and Quackity scooted past him, both offering apologetic smiles, and Sapnap laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed as he brushed by. Once the door had closed behind them, Dream breathed a shaky sigh through his nose and pulled the bandana and goggles off his face.

"Are you alright?" George said quietly.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

He barely made it to the sink before his chest began heaving, desperately sucking in air that seemed void of all oxygen. His throat closed and he tried to retch, but all that exited his mouth was a guttural half-groan that burned in his throat like pure bile. *What the fuck is happening? A choked sob ripped its way from Dream's throat. What's happening to me?*

He collapsed backwards as weakness spread through his knees and someone caught him beneath the armpits. "Shh," George murmured in his ear. "Lay down before you pass out."

"What—" A shiver wracked Dream's body. He threw his hands over his face instinctively, digging his nails into the flesh of his eyelids. He felt his knees hit the floor. "What the fuck is happening?"

George laid him on the tile floor and pressed a hand to Dream's forehead. "Are you feeling sick?"

"I feel like I'm fucking dying!" Dream sobbed. He grasped George's knee before his frazzled brain managed to stop him and gripped it as tightly as he could, desperate to pull him closer. *Hold me*, he so desperately wanted to scream. *Hold me before I keel over right here on the floor.*

"Is this about Quackity wearing your mask?" George asked. "Or going back to the nether?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" Dream wrenched himself onto his stomach and pressed his forehead to the cool tiles beneath him. "Leave me be for a while! I need to calm down."

"Absolutely not! You've lost your goddamned mind!" George exclaimed.

Dream felt another sob bubbling in his throat and forcefully swallowed it down. "This is embarrassing! Go away!"

"You've seen me cry like a goddamn baby before! This is nothing!"

"Please!" Dream's voice cracked, sending a wave of humiliation down his spine. *This day could not get any worse.* "Please, just let me have a minute to get off the fucking floor."

George paused, staring imploringly. "Dream, I can—"

“You can comfort me outside. I just need a moment of privacy,” Dream whispered. “A minute at most.”

That was a lie. He needed far more than a minute. He needed hours, days, however long it took to take a pair of shears to his ribcage and finally cut the weeds blooming around his bones into nonexistence. *This is dangerous*. Dream gave George a weak, tearful smile as he stood and left the bathroom, leaving him curled on the floor with his heart pounding in his ears. *I can't handle this.*

Dream pushed himself onto his elbows and wiped at the snot bubbling above his lip. “Holy fuck,” he groaned beneath his breath. His body ached as though he’d run a marathon. *Breathe. Regain control.* He sucked in a mouthful of air with relative ease, only for it to escape him in a series of hiccuping sobs. *Pull yourself together before you do something stupid!*

The ghost of George’s fingers traced his palms, his healing arm, the lines of his hideous facial scars. *I am happy not being wanted. I don't need to be wanted.* The memory of burying his face into George’s shoulder and finally being held like he’d always wanted to be played in vivid detail behind his eyelids. *Especially not by him.*

Dream wasn’t sure exactly how long he stayed curled on the bathroom floor, but when he finally stumbled back into George’s room, still trembling, George had moved the armour stand and Dream’s axes away from the fireplace and lit a roaring blaze. Dream realized he’d closed the curtains too. The room was dim and warm, as dangerous as a den of venomous snakes.

“Your mask is on the table,” George said. “I wiped it down in case you don’t like other people’s faces in it.”

“Thank you,” Dream sighed. “Nobody’s ever worn it before. Nobody’s even tried. I don’t know why it freaked me out so much.”

“I’ll talk to Quackity later. I’m sure he feels awful.” George poked one last log into the fireplace and sat back on his knees. “For now, let’s just try and relax.”

“We have to pack,” Dream said with a frown.

“We have hours, Dream. You can spare 15 minutes calming down so you don’t have a heart attack.”

“I’m calm now.”

“Liar.”

“Shut it.”

Dream practically collapsed before the fire and pulled his knees to his chest. His head felt like it was full of cotton. “I got fucked up because Sapnap thought it would be a good idea to let Quackity wear my mask, okay?”

George shifted until he was mirroring Dream’s position. The fire ignited his features in a dazzling orange. “It has nothing to do with the nether?”

“I don’t know!” Dream pressed his eyes into his kneecaps. A phantom ache spread down his arm. “Why am I being interrogated?”

“You’re not! I’m just trying to help you,” George said irritably. “Don’t be an ass.”

"I'm not an ass, I just— I'm just—" Dream buried his hands in his hair and pulled until his scalp was burning. George leaned over with an unhappy grunt and batted his hands away from his head. "*George!* I'm trying to calm myself down and you're not helping at all."

Dream felt a pang of regret as George sat back, chewing on his cheek. "I don't know how to help you," George said. "You don't really let me."

If I let you, I'll crack. Dream turned away and trained his eyes on a flame eating away at one of the smaller logs. "I've always handled stuff by myself. You're not supposed to help me."

"I want to, though. I want to be your friend."

No you don't. You want more than that. "You are my friend, George. You've been my friend since we got here." *You want what I've wanted for almost a decade.*

"You're not treating me like a friend — you're treating me like a king! I don't want that anymore!"

"You are a king, dumbass! Of course I'm going to treat you like one!"

"Fucking stop it, then! I command you!"

Dream gritted his teeth. "That's not how it works, George."

"I'm a king! It works however I want it to work!" George said angrily. "I command you to tell me the fucking truth about things!"

Dream swallowed. *This is bad. This is bad.* "I am telling the truth. I am your friend! I promise!"

"No!" George stood and jabbed a finger down at him. "You *were* my friend, Dream. You were my friend on the night we found Tubbo and that night only."

That night. Dream's tongue tingled with the memory of pastries and the taste of George's breath. *That night has appeared in my dreams every night since.*

"I fucked it up that night, didn't I?" George's mouth twisted into a pained grimace. "I ruined whatever chance we really had of being friends."

"No, no. That's not it." Dream tried to will himself to stand but found he was rooted to the floor. "George, don't be an idiot."

"I'm not fucking stupid, Dream. You barely want to be around me anymore. You do the things you do because it makes *me* happy, because it comforts *me*," George continued at a furious hiss. "You don't want to be my friend at all, do you?"

"I do! I care for you! You are my friend!" Dream cried.

"Well, I don't feel like it! I feel like I'm stuck in no man's land because you won't fucking communicate with me or bite the bullet and cut me off!"

George turned away and buried his face in his hands, falling silent. "Make up your mind, Dream. For the love of every god in the Aether, don't keep me in this weird middle ground. It's painful."

He walked out of the firelight and made his way to his bed. Dream watched him pick up his cloak and felt a jolt of fear shoot through him. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk outside. I think it's best if we're not together right now," George said with a shaky

sigh. "I'll talk to Quackity about the mask. You rest."

"You're not leaving." Dream found himself on his feet, moving in George's direction. "Not now."

"You wanted to be alone, so I'm leaving you alone. I've said all I needed to say." George slipped around him and darted for the door, head bent low. "I'm not in the mood to be—"

Dream caught a fistful of George's cape in his hand and yanked him backwards without thinking. George stumbled backwards with a startled yell and fell hard into Dream's chest. "What the fuck?" He shrieked. "Are you trying to kill me?"

If I tell him the truth, I condemn us both to eventual misery. Dream wrapped his arms around George's chest and squeezed. *But I'll lose him forever if I don't do something.*

George squirmed in his grip. "Let me go, Dream. You can't fake your way out of this one."

"No," Dream pressed his face into George's shoulder. "Not until you promise you won't leave."

"I don't want to continue like this. It hurts."

Hurt sliced through the boiling terror in Dream's chest like an icepick. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You confuse me," George said. "I don't get you."

Dream let his grip on George loosen, and when he didn't step away, spun him gently and pulled him back in. "I'm scared," he said. George's nose traced a line on Dream's collarbone as he buried his face in the side of Dream's neck. The touch sent electricity down his veins. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Then be honest with me," George murmured against him. "I'll heal, if you can't continue this friendship. I'd rather have nothing than have something fake."

George fit into his arms like a glove, somehow as frightening as he was beautiful. Dream closed his eyes, shivering as George's breath warmed his sternum. *Oh, gods. I'm cracking.* He carded a hand into George's hair. *This is far past what I can handle.* George let out a small hum and tipped his head back ever so slightly as if reading Dream's mind. *I'm damned for this. I'm so, so fucking damned for this.*

George's lips tasted of tea.

The kiss lasted but a mere second before George stepped away, wide-eyed. One of the logs in the fireplace burst with an explosion of yellow sparks, forcing Dream's eyes away for a moment. When he looked back, George was staring at him, his expression unreadable.

"What was that?" He whispered. "Was that real?"

That's a question I can answer. "Of course," Dream said. His whole body felt numb. "Of course it was."

George watched him for a moment, then his face broke into the barest hint of a smile. "Please don't make me regret believing you."

"I won't. I promise." Dream grabbed his hand and kissed it, ignoring the internal wildfire igniting within him. He could barely feel it, anyway.

"I'm going to take that walk now," George said. "I need some time to process what the hell just

happened.”

“Of course. I’ll... nap. Or something.” Dream stepped back. “Have a nice walk, George.”

George nodded slowly. “Thank you. I’ll be quiet coming in in case you’re resting.”

“That’s very thoughtful. Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

With that, he left. Without a fight, without a word, without a sound. Dream walked to the couch in silence and collapsed down onto it. His mask lay within arm’s reach, flickering in the orange light of the fire. The eyes seemed to bore into him. *What the fuck did you just do?*

Something I can’t take back, Dream thought. No matter how much I end up regretting it.

Chapter End Notes

haha! what the fuck just happened

y’all I was lowkey terrified to post this chapter 🤔 I am not used to romance so sjdhskhdjf but I thought everyone was getting a little too comfy so I spiced :) it :) up :)

at least they communicated! sort of :) don’t expect the tension to be over, though!

any ideas on what’s happening next? What shall our fun little group encounter on their Tommy rescue? Who will... or won’t... make it home?

:]

-Ophelia

Rescue Mission (A Little Harder, This Time)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“They’re all leaving?”

“For a couple weeks, yeah. They think they know where Tommy is.”

Ranboo tipped Tubbo’s head forward with a gentle push so that he could reach the backs of his horns. “Phil, Wilbur, Techno, George, Dream and Sapnap. I’m pretty sure,” he said, dipping his cloth into the shallow bowl of oil beside him. “Tell me if any of this stuff gets on your neck.”

Tubbo let out a small hum as Ranboo began shining one of his horns, barely reacting when Ranboo’s clumsy hand slipped and dragged the hot cloth down the back of his neck. “That’s all of them. What if they all die?” He asked rather calmly.

Ranboo kicked at Tubbo’s ankle with the toe of his boot. “Don’t say stuff like that,” he frowned. “They won’t die. They’re too smart.”

“The Eretians want to kill them. Who’s to say they won’t?” Tubbo drew in a long breath. “All of them. Gone, in one fell swoop. Boom.”

The wind outside rattled the large windows of Tubbo’s room. Ranboo shrugged and looked away, playing with a stray chess piece beneath his foot. “Then we’ll be the ones to survive, I guess.”

“I’m worried, but I don’t *feel* worried. Do you get that?” Tubbo didn’t seem to register Ranboo’s response to his prior question. “It’s like my brain’s just telling me I should be worried. Does that make sense?” He kicked his foot up onto the wall and cracked his toes with startling aggression. “I’m just waiting for all this Tommy stuff to sink in and make me go crazy again.”

“Leave it to all of them.” Ranboo tried to sound comforting, but his voice came out weak and unsure instead. “They’re some of the best minds in the whole country! I doubt anything could kill Dream or Technoblade.”

“Do you think I’ll be like them, when I’m king? Are people going to say I’m one of the continent’s best minds?”

Tubbo twisted in his chair and stared up at Ranboo with wide eyes. Ranboo shrugged once more. “Probably. You’re pretty smart already. I mean, you can only go up from here.”

That didn’t seem to satisfy Tubbo. “Are they going to say I can’t be killed? That I’ll survive anything?” His voice began to raise. “Are they going to say that I can’t die?”

“I don’t know! Why?” Ranboo said. “Why do you care?”

“Because I *can* die!” Tubbo brought his fists down hard on the back of the chair, sending the wet rag in Ranboo’s hands fluttering to the floor. “Everyone can die! You can die! They can all die! Tommy can die, too! Every single fucking one of us can die!”

Ranboo blinked, shocked. “Tubbo, I—“

Tubbo stood, scowling, then flung himself onto his bed with a low moan. “I’m tired of people

dying! I never get a damn break! Everyone I love goes and *dies* !”

He kicked his legs into the unmade covers and tugged them up over himself until nothing was visible but his half-shined horns. Ranboo stood still for a moment, unsure of whether it would be better to go comfort him, stay back, or leave altogether. *I'd rather not get headbutted, thank you very much.*

Tubbo answered that question for him. A hand slipped out from under the wrinkled blanket and made a grabbing motion in his direction. “I’m here, man,” Ranboo said quietly, laying down beside the Tubbo-shaped lump on the bed. “You know I am.”

“You’re the *only* one I have, Ranboo,” came Tubbo’s shaking voice. “Everyone else leaves me. Everyone else *dies* .”

“Oh, no they don’t.” Ranboo pressed his nose into the blankets on Tubbo’s head. “Phil and his crew will all come back safe with Tommy. I know they will.”

“We don’t know that. Tommy could already be dead. This could just be one massive trap.”

“If it is, they’ve got Technoblade and Dream and Phil to deal with. Phil was the general of his father’s army before he was king, Tubbo. He knows his stuff!”

“No.” Tubbo’s voice dropped to a low, pained moan. “Something will go wrong. Something will happen. I just know it.”

“Have faith, man,” Ranboo said. “They’re going to be alright.”

Tubbo shifted beneath the blankets until his face was pressed into Ranboo’s chest. “I had faith in my dad,” he replied. “Look where that got me.”

Ranboo flattened his ears to his head. With a sniffle, Tubbo began to tremble in his arms, so he laid one his hands on Tubbo’s back and pulled him close. “I’m sorry, Tubbo,” he whispered. “I don’t know how to help.”

“Don’t go anywhere. Teleport away from all danger.” Tubbo shuffled as if wiping at his eyes. “Don’t go near a fucking battlefield until I’m six feet in a grave.”

Ranboo chuckled dryly. “If that’s all I have to do, I’ll do it gladly.”

“I want you to come home with me to Manburg when I go back. I don’t want to leave you.”

A wave of anxiety crested over Ranboo’s shoulders. “But Tommy...”

“Tommy still has his dad!” Tubbo sat up abruptly, beating his hands on his thighs. “Tommy has his brothers! He has King George and Dream! He has *everyone*! It’s not fair for him to keep you too!”

Ranboo recoiled from his friend’s anger but fought the urge to teleport away, even as Tubbo grabbed the fabric of Ranboo’s jacket and clenched it until his knuckles were white. “You can’t be mad at him for that, Tubbo. You can’t blame him for still having his dad around.”

Tubbo buried his face in his hands and let out a long, high-pitched wail. “Tommy wasn’t supposed to disappear,” he sobbed. “He wasn’t supposed to start scaring me. He’s meant to be stable. He’s meant to be something for *me* .”

Unable to make his tongue move, Ranboo opened his arms and let Tubbo fling himself into them. "If he's dead, you're all I have," Tubbo continued. "You're the only one left."

His hair smelt of oil and sweat and the sour stench of grief. Ranboo leaned into him, pressed his cheek against the tough surface of his horn. "I'm not going anywhere. Not a chance."

"I love you, man," Tubbo whispered. "I love you so much."

The door opened and Technoblade stepped in, looking perturbed. He had a netherite chestplate beneath one of his arms. "Who screamed?"

"I did," Ranboo replied immediately. "But we're fine. We just need some alone time."

Technoblade's mouth quirked into a small frown. *Of course he doesn't believe you, idiot. Tubbo's practically still screaming.* "Should I send something up for you two to eat?"

"Uh, yeah," Ranboo nodded quickly. "Sure. Thanks."

Technoblade left without another word, leaving Ranboo both relieved and anxious in his absence. Tubbo went limp in his arms with a small sigh. *I can't leave Tommy, but I can't abandon you either.* A tired smile warmed Ranboo's mouth. *Hopefully you'll feel better by the time you have to go home. If not, I'll just learn to teleport large distances.*

Another breeze rattled the windows. Ranboo wanted to sleep.

Good luck, guys. Please bring Tommy home.

~

"Dream?"

Something tapped the pillow beneath Dream's cheek. Groaning, Dream shifted, but couldn't find the strength to open his heavy eyes. *I'm warm*, he thought blearily. *Let me stay that way.*

But the gentle taps returned, this time a mere hair's length from his closed eyes. "Dream." George's whisper cut through the murkiness of his tired brain. "Time to get up."

His voice brought back memories of hours before in a vivid wave. *I kissed him.* Dream felt terror crawl up into his throat. *I actually fucking kissed him. Why did I kiss him?*

"I know you're awake, Dream," George murmured. "Stop pretending."

His finger flicked the neckline of Dream's tunic once, twice. Dream kept his eyes firmly shut. *I kissed him. He knows, now. He knows about me.* His tongue felt dry and tasted of blood. He must have bitten his cheek in his sleep. *I have to face him. I have to face what I did.*

"Come on." George's voice quieted, then went soft with the barest hint of tentative tenderness. "You can't ignore me forever."

Dream forced one of his eyes to open. The room around him had lightened since he'd fallen asleep, the fire now cold ashes in the fireplace. George sat before him, dressed in plain but warm-looking clothes. He was frowning slightly, eyebrows puckered.

The words left Dream's mouth before he could stop them. "Red's your colour." He pulled one of

his half-asleep hands out from under him and poked the maroon material of George's tunic. "It looks good."

George snorted softly and averted his eyes. "Can't even see red properly, but thanks," he said. A light blush crawled up his neck and cheeks. *Pretty asshole*, Dream thought. *You're impossible to ignore.*

George rose from where he'd been crouched on the balls of his feet in front of the couch and sat back on the small coffee table, hands folded neatly in his lap. Dream shifted onto his side, freeing his other tingling hand from where it had been pinned beneath him. For a moment, they stared at one another, both unable to break the silence. Finally, Dream forced out a small, "Hello."

"Hi," George replied. He averted his eyes once more and fiddled with his hands in his lap.

"What time is it?"

"Just past one. I figured you'd be groggy if I let you sleep any longer."

"You let me sleep for *four hours*?" Dream fought back the bark in his voice as George's face puckered into a glower. "I mean, thank you. I feel rested, but we have to pack."

"I've been packing for us, don't worry." George pointed to several backpacks by the door. "Sapnap came in and helped me. He can't come on the mission, though."

"He can't?" Dream frowned. "Why?"

"Technoblade wanted him to stay behind and guard Ranboo and Tubbo. Apparently he swung by Sapnap's room just as he was leaving to come help me pack."

"Oh." *I won't even have him to lean on. It'll be just you and me.* "Well, I trust Technoblade. He must want someone here he can trust."

Yeah," George said. "He feels awful about the mask thing, by the way. He really didn't know you'd have that big of a reaction." A small smile lifted his features. "He says he promises now to guard it with his life."

Gods, I love that idiot. Dream crinkled his nose and wiped the dried drool off the corner of his mouth with his sleeve. "I'll make sure to talk to Quackity too so he doesn't think he's on any sort of hit list now. He seems to think I'm some sort of brute or something."

"He's a sheltered, rich lord-in-waiting. What do you expect?" George chuckled. "And I'm sure we'll have time. It's barely past lunchtime."

He smiled as Dream sat up, but there was tension in his neck and in his hands. "We have time," he repeated. "So I was hoping we could talk."

Talking leads to trouble. Talking leads to me fucking things up more than I already have. "Talk about what?" Dream asked stiffly.

George's cheeks continued to darken. "You kissed me. You told me you don't return my feelings, then you kissed me and told me it was real. That's what I want to talk about."

"What is there to say?" Dream said, crossing his arms.

"Well, there's a lot I want to hear." George mirrored him, leaning forward when Dream drew into

himself. "Do you still stand by what you said? That it was real?"

It was so real it came almost instinctively. "Yeah," Dream nodded. "I wouldn't lie to you like that."

"You lied when you said you didn't return my feelings," George said. "Or are these feelings a recent development?"

Dream felt his chest growing tighter. "I don't know," he blurted. "Not... super new."

"So you did lie to me back then."

"That was not the time for me to confess," Dream said sternly. "That was not what you needed to hear in that moment."

"That was *everything* I needed in that moment! I needed *you*! And you left me alone!" George cried.

"You sent me away! I would have stayed with you!"

"What was I supposed to do?" George planted his hands on either side of him and gripped the table's edge until his knuckles were white. "Curl up in the arms of a man who didn't love me back? Who'd dodged a kiss I might as well have forced on him the night before? Do you understand how degrading I would have considered that for the both of us?"

I'm fucking up. We're fighting again. "I'm sorry, okay?" Dream said. "I was scared. I did what I thought was best."

George slumped, groaning beneath his breath. "What you thought was best was agony for me."

"I didn't want to hurt you," Dream said earnestly. "I'm sorry. Really."

"So you thought it'd be better to deny everything and then keep yourself glued to my side so I'd never get over you?"

"You would have gotten over me. Don't say you wouldn't have."

"It would have been pretty damn hard."

Dream looked to the floor, breathing a long sigh through his nose. George rubbed at his eyes with his knuckles. *This is my punishment. This is my hell. I deserve this.* "For the record," Dream muttered, "I never lied about wanting to be your friend. That was real, too."

George's face shifted, but Dream couldn't tell if the gentle pout that shaped his lips was one of bashfulness, discomfort, or simple pensivity. When he finally spoke, his voice was gentle in a way that made Dream's whole body ache. "That's nice to hear. I... want to be your friend, too. Truly."

"Can we start with that?" Dream asked. "Friends? Real, good friends?"

That brought a real smile forward on George's lips. *You deserve so much more than me*, Dream thought mournfully. *You deserve so much more than I could possibly give you.*

George leaned forward, seemingly spurred on by a burst of confidence that relit the sparks in his eyes, and fixed the part of Dream's neckline that had curled in as he slept. His fingers brushed Dream's throat as he patted it down, leaving trails of scorched flesh in their wake.

Fuck. Dream may as well have been able to breathe fire.

“Can I make one request?” George said. His cheeks were flushed, spilling pink down his neck.

“Of course you can,” Dream replied.

“Can I have one more kiss?”

Dream lowered his eyes and felt warmth rising in his throat. “Just one,” he said. *Thought I wouldn’t stop you if you took more. I don’t think I could.*

But George was polite, and George was proper. He stood without a word, crossed the minuscule distance between them, and sat down pressed to Dream’s side. Dream turned his head, but George was already there, cupping Dream’s face in both hands. “Just one,” he echoed in a gentle whisper. “I promise.”

What a menace you are. Dream felt every cell in his body ignite as their lips connected. George’s fingertips curled in, tracing lines down Dream’s cheeks. *You could almost trick me into thinking I’m what you want.*

George pulled back, leaving Dream with smoke curling from his lips and ears. “There,” he breathed. “Now, we’re friends.”

“Friends,” Dream echoed. “I like that.”

“And friends don’t lie to each other, so I want nothing but honesty from you.”

“Mmhm.” Dream nodded his head and savoured the fading taste on his lips. *Sorry, George. I can’t give you everything yet.* “No more lies.”

“None. Or I’ll make you regret it.” George cracked a smile. “I can be scary when I want to be.”

You’re my greatest fear playing out before my eyes. Dream rolled his eyes. “Try and scare me. See how that works for you.” *You’re the prettiest hell I’ve ever been through.*

“Stop it.” George turned and walked away. There was a lightness in his step that wasn’t there before, a pep that filled Dream with a dangerous satisfaction. “Come look over what I packed. Sappnap said we should be good, but I want to make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

“I trust Sappnap. No need to pull everything out,” Dream said with a wave of his hand. “A couple changes of clothes, bandages, a sharpening stone or two — we should be fine. Technoblade will probably be bringing materials for potions, so we don’t need to worry about that.”

“Sappnap gave me these, too.” George held up a pair of short swords in leather hilts. “He said he doesn’t want me being unarmed anymore.”

Dream snorted, then stood and moved to George’s side as he sat down on the floor with the swords in his lap. “Well, that’s proof that Sappnap likes you,” he said, reaching over George’s knee to slip one of the blades from its casing. “These are good blades. Real sturdy.”

“Really?” George grinned. “He said they’d be good for me because I haven’t got much weapons training.”

“They are. Not as deadly as an axe or a long sword, but they’ll do good damage if you swing ‘em right.” Dream pointed to the other sword, still resting against George’s knee. “Show me your grip.”

“It’s probably bad,” George said with a small laugh. “My dad tried to teach me weapons training,

but he dropped it pretty quick when he realized I was awful at it.”

“That’s why he hired me, huh?” Dream replied. “Easier to hire a guard to protect you than to teach you to defend yourself?”

George slipped the sword from its hilt and jabbed it forward as if stabbing an invisible enemy. “Sounds about right. You’d have done the same if you’d been the one trying to teach me.”

“Oh, I bet I could force some skills into you.” Dream cupped George’s hand in both of his and adjusted his fingers around the sword’s polished handle. “Keep your thumb parallel to the blade when you’re holding this kind of sword. It’ll give you more wrist power.”

“Boom.” George flicked the sword in a quick arc. “I’m the best already.”

“A true menace to society,” Dream said. His chest felt warm. When George turned and clanked their two swords together with a quiet ‘*ka-pow*’, sparks shot up Dream’s spine and left his fingers tingling. *You’re going to be the death of me.*

“Do you think we’re going to find Tommy, Dream?” Said George, looking down at the sword in his hand with gentle eyes.

“Of course,” Dream replied immediately. “I trust Phil. Even if he’s not in the fucking Holy Lands or wherever we’re going, I know that he’ll turn up. He’s *Tommy*, for Gods’ sake! That kid could turn the world upside down if he put his mind to it.”

“He reminds me of you, you know?” George slipped the two swords back into their hilts and set them aside. “Prince Tommy. You two are so similar.”

Dream raised an eyebrow. “Is that meant to be an insult or a compliment?”

“A compliment!” George laughed. “Don’t be so hard on the poor kid.”

“He nearly broke my nose a couple weeks ago! Forgive me for not being immediately fond of the little bastard,” Dream replied. “But do elaborate. I’m interested now.”

“It’s hard to explain,” George said. “You two are... intense. Like you’ve both got a fire constantly lit under your asses.”

Dream let out a snort. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

George whacked his arm with a displeased grumble. “Let me finish, idiot! I meant that you’re both driven. You get what you want. And you certainly don’t like criticism.”

“I can take criticism!” Dream cried.

“You sulk and get defensive for two or three hours before actually taking it to heart. A step above Tommy’s tantrums, sure, but you’re no humble monk.” He flicked Dream’s knee. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about the fits you used to throw in front of my dad when he dared scold you for something.”

“Aether Almighty.” Dream buried his face in his hands, but he couldn’t help but let a low chuckle seep through his lips. “I’m surprised he didn’t fire me.”

“He probably would have, had you not been the best at what you do,” George said. “But here we are. I may actually grow to be older than my dad if you stick around.”

“I plan on it.” Dream replied. “Maybe we’ll both live to be ancient like Phil. He’s got to be nearing a hundred years old by now.”

George tipped his head back and laughed. The sound hit Dream’s body like a bucket of ice water.

I’m definitely not going to survive the next couple weeks.

~

“It’s sundown, Dad. Dream and George should be here soon.”

Wilbur traced a finger along the bottom of the windowsill, picking up dust on his fingertip. “Are we leaving directly after they come?”

“Assuming all is well with them, yes.” Phil adjusted the straps of his wing armour, clinking about as though he were a large set of chimes. “Techno’s readying the horses downstairs. He said he’d give you Carl to ride, just because he’s your favourite.”

Wilbur couldn’t bring himself to force a smile onto his lips. “Cool.”

He turned, resting the back of his head on the cool glass. Phil looked him over with mournful eyes. *You better still be alive, you asshole*, Wilbur thought, praying that somehow Tommy could hear him. *Wherever you’ve ended up now.*

His father moved forward, picking up Wilbur’s abandoned helmet off the counter as he passed, then placed it on Wilbur’s head with gentle hands. “You look so grown up in this,” he murmured. “This is your first big mission.”

And you don’t want me here. I know you don’t. Wilbur closed his eyes and leaned into his father’s chest. Phil let out a low churr and wrapped his wings around them both. The metal of his armour was cool against Wilbur’s cheek, both calming and discomforting at the same time. “I know you’re scared, Will,” Phil said. “But we’ll get Tommy back. I have a really good feeling about this place.”

“I don’t.” Wilbur screwed his eyes shut even more until blooms of muted colour swirled behind his eyelids. “I hate this. I hate all of this. Tommy should have never gone missing.”

“This is the life of royalty, Wilbur. We are our own weaknesses. You must be strong in the face of your loved ones being used against you.” Phil rested his chin on Wilbur’s head; Wilbur bent his knees to allow it, to feel small again in the warmth of his father’s safety. “This won’t be the last time Tommy will be used as a weapon. They know what effect he has on us.”

Fuck you, Eret. Wilbur’s fists itched with the urge to punch something. *I’ll blow you to fucking smithereens if you dare show your face.*

Phil tensed as if he sensed the rage bubbling in Wilbur’s chest, but he offered no words of comfort. Instead, one of his gloved hands moved up Wilbur’s neck and came to rest on the back of his head, cradling it with achingly familiar tenderness. “I know you’re hurting, Will, but Tommy needs you. He needs you to be strong.”

“I don’t want to be strong,” Wilbur whispered. His throat began to close. “I want Tommy back.”

Phil pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You don’t have to come if you don’t want—“

“No!” Wilbur pushed himself away and stumbled backwards until his wings hit the window. “I am coming. I need to see for myself that Tommy gets back safely.”

“Alright, alright.” Phil raised his hands defensively. “I was just making sure you weren’t having second thoughts.”

“I’m not a kid anymore! And I’m not a coward!” Wilbur yelled. “Stop trying to make me second-guess myself!”

Phil gritted his teeth. “I’m not—“

The door opened with a loud squeal. In walked Dream, looking as frightening as ever with his armour and mask on. George was step behind him, dressed in a suit of armour of his own. He smiled when he saw Wilbur, unaware of or simply ignoring the obvious tension in the air.

“We’re ready,” Dream said gruffly. “You’re aware Sapnap isn’t able to come?”

“Yes,” Phil replied. Glancing furtively back at Wilbur with a frown, he moved back into the middle of the room and stretched his wings out behind him. “Technoblade said he’d feel more comfortable if someone we trusted were to stay back with Ranboo and Tubbo. They’re... fragile. Tubbo especially.”

“Understandable,” George said with a nod.

“Techno is preparing the horses now,” Phil continued. “So long as you’ve got all personal belongings you need, we can be on our way. The portal is ready for us outside.”

Dream nodded. “We’re good.”

“Wilbur?”

Wilbur blinked. All three men looked at him, each with varying expressions of impatience, anxiety, and in his father’s case, woeful displeasure.

I’m coming for you, Tommy. He roused his wings and straightened his shoulders. *And when I find you, I’m going to throw you off a fucking pier for scaring me so much.*

“Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

damn George rly kissed Dream and then went ‘now we’re bros :)’ f in the chat for pissbaby 😏

This fic is officially longer than A Very Odd Family, Indeed! Thank you all for sticking around for the ride. Not going to lie, it’s hard for me to update nowadays. I’m having a lot of fanfic guilt (my first romantic story and I’m always afraid of fetishizing characters or making mlm uncomfortable) and fears that my story is not as interesting as it should be. However, I shan’t let my negative feelings overcome me! So, I’ll need some help from you wonderful people who have given me so much joy by leaving comments. You needn’t be long if you don’t wish, but if you can, answer these questions for me:

1. Is the pacing of this story satisfactory? Would you like it to be faster?
2. Are there any storylines you believe I’ve forgotten about and would like to see more

of?

3. What have been your favourite aspects of this story?

Feel free to give any other praises or criticisms you'd like. They really do help me, as I base some of my plot points off of what you guys predict/want! I value being in line with my audience a lot as a fanfic author, so heap them words on me, positive or negative! Maybe don't call me a dumb bitch but if you do I'll take it in stride because I'm a bad bitch like that

I've also considered breaking this into two separate stories, because WOW I have so much story left and I'm already at 26 chappies, but I haven't decided on what to do yet. It all depends on where I could end the story cleanly.

So here, enjoy some more Communication from our fav boys! You all were so happy to see them not being absolute dipshits last chapter. There is more bullshittery to come, but lucky for Dream and George, our good crowfather Phil is there to babysit 😊

Stay cheesin my friends

-Ophelia

Hot Travels

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Foolish!”

Tommy landed on the two-headed snake statue and curled his toes into the sun-warmed sandstone. “Foolish! Where are you?” He cried to the air. When there came no response, he cursed under his breath and scowled, wincing as it pulled at the sunburnt skin over his nose. “Build boy! Where are you?”

“—portal!” Came a distant scream. “—concrete!”

“What?” Tommy opened his wings. His flight feathers had finally come in again — they were a bright, blazing red, much cooler than the pink ones that had come in first. Foolish joked that he had the magic of the Land of the Undying to thank for his amazing plumage. *I never want to go home. I'm meant to be in the sun. I'm a sun boy.*

He kicked off the snake statue and soared into the air above the glittering courtyard, scanning the area with narrowed eyes. Sure enough, Foolish was crouched by a small pond of water near his nether portal a small way's away, soaking something in buckets. Seeing his form above him, Foolish lifted his shining head and waved.

“Foolish!” Tommy cried as he landed, spraying sand onto the god's lap. “Cleopatra's hungry!”

Cleopatra was the docile enderman that wandered about the temple. Despite towering far over Tommy's head, she posed little more danger to him than the nipping parrots that nested in the lush trees at the edge of the property. Tommy found she reminded him a lot of Ranboo; they were both rather shy and loved the gardens.

Foolish sat back on his heels, panting, and hefted his bucket of black slush out of the shallow pool. “There's chorus fruit in the main kitchen. Those are her favourites!” He said.

Tommy squinted at his bucket. “What the fuck is in there?” He asked.

“Concrete powder! I'm making the new portal look cool,” Foolish replied. “Concrete has to be soaked before it's set.”

“Awesome!” Tommy exclaimed gleefully. “I fucking love this place.”

“And you'll love this portal too. It's going to be massive once I rebuild it — just as big here as it is in the nether! People will be able to see it for miles.” Foolish hefted himself to his feet, bucket in hand. “I'd let you help, but building is a big boy job. Tiny feathery guys are no match for heavy concrete.”

Tommy scowled. “I'm strong!” He said.

Foolish raised a single golden eyebrow. “Oh, really?” He dropped the bucket at Tommy's feet with a loud *thunk*. “Pick that up for me.”

Tommy puffed his chest. “Easy, bitch,” he said confidently. He bent down and grasped the bucket's thin metal handle in both hands. “I could beat you up easily.”

“Oh, I bet,” Foolish smiled.

Sticking his tongue out, Tommy tightened his grip on the bucket handle and pulled upwards with all his might.

Shit. Fuck. The bucket barely moved. *Fuck. Ow.*

“Having trouble?” Foolish said, the corners of his mouth twitching with a suppressed grin.

“No.” Tommy tried again, managing to lift the bucket a mere inch above the ground before letting it slam back to the ground. He picked it up again, using the weight of his wings to force his back to arch. “I’m fine, asshole.”

“You’re doing better than I thought you would.” Foolish shrugged. “Maybe you do have some meat on those little birdy bones of yours.”

The bucket clanked to the ground again. Tommy’s arms were shaking. “Duh.” He swallowed the exhausted cough crawling up his throat. “Plus, I’d be stronger if I hadn’t just been flying. So yeah.”

“Go cut Cleopatra some fruit, big man,” Foolish said. He ruffled Tommy’s hair with a warm hand. “She likes it in long slices.”

Tommy gave him a quick salute. “Hell yeah!”

The fly back to the temple’s main pyramid was quick and strenuous; by the time Tommy stumbled into the open-windowed chest room that served as Foolish’s kitchen, he was red-faced, laughing through his pants of exhaustion. Cleopatra stood in the corner as if she’d been waiting for him, clutching one of the potted herb plants from Foolish’s windowsill. “Hello!” Tommy said jovially. He roused his wings as his adrenaline faded, leaving him shaking. *I need to eat something.*

He grabbed a long, thin knife from where they hung upon the wall and plucked a chorus fruit from a mesh bag within one of the chests. Cleopatra chirped curiously and stalked closer, holding the potted plant between her taloned hands with care. “Hungry?” Tommy said, slicing through the chorus fruit’s tough stem. “You know, I don’t like these fruits too much.” He turned the fruit sideways and cut it in half. The spray of juice tickled his nose. “They’re spicy. They make my tongue tingle.”

Cleopatra churred and grabbed a chorus fruit half out of Tommy’s hand. Tommy snorted. “I’m still cutting it! It’ll only be a—*fuck!* ”

The knife clattered to the floor. Cleopatra teleported away with a frightened shriek. Tommy yanked his hand to his chest and doubled over at the waist, clenching his teeth as sharp agony burst in his palm. “Fuck!” He shrieked. “Fucking ow!”

He tentatively forced his fingers to open but couldn’t manage to look at the gash between his thumb and pointer finger for more than a second before his heart was leaping into his throat, choking the air from his lungs. *That’s a lot of blood!* Tommy’s hand twitched on instinct and the pain was immediate, nearly blinding. He stumbled backwards, gasping, wings flapping erratically as his already-shaking knees lost what little strength they had. “Foolish!” He cried, though he knew the god was nowhere near close enough to hear him. “Foolish!”

Blood landed at his feet in rapid spatters. The front of his makeshift tunic was already soaked and sticky. Tommy ran outside, gripping his injured hand so tightly that his wrist began to ache. “Foolish!” His voice cracked. *No. Not now. I can’t do this in front of him.*

There was anger inside him, now. Anger at being injured, anger that it hurt so badly, anger that Foolish was *nowhere the fuck to be found*. Tommy turned on his heel with a small wail and bolted back inside. “Fuck!” He grabbed the first piece of fabric he laid his eyes on and practically stuffed his hand into it. “*Fuck!*”

A wave of sudden nausea filled his head with static, sending him to his knees. In what felt like blink of an eye, Tommy found himself curled on the floor, shadowed by a massive figure kneeling over him. “Little man!” Foolish’s voice echoed in his ears. “Tommy, wake up!”

Something grabbed his injured hand. Tommy shot up into a sitting position, fighting the darkness that threatened to consume his vision, and landed a weak slap to Foolish’s arm. “Get off of me!” He shrieked. “That hurts!”

He yanked his hand back to his chest and tried to struggle back to his knees, but Foolish planted both his massive hands on either of Tommy’s shoulders and held him where he was. “Tommy—” he pouted as Tommy bashed his fist into his chest— “My man! Stop moving! You’re bleeding a lot!”

“Shut up!” Tommy felt the red-hot claws of desperation tearing up his back. *He can’t see me like this. He’ll kick me out.* “Leave me alone!”

“Fat chance!” Foolish said. “Let me see your hand!”

“No!” Tommy kicked his arm until one of the hands on his shoulders loosened, then dashed up the stairs with all the might left in his shaking body. He made halfway into his makeshift hammock bed before fainting again. When the world finally came spinning back to him, he was propped up in Foolish’s lap with his injured hand outstretched and resting on Foolish’s knee. Beside them sat an opened health potion, glittering in the sunlight.

“This’ll only hurt for a second,” Foolish murmured. “I’m just going to dab a bit of potion on it to clean it.”

The tears came in one unavoidable wave. “No!” Tommy wailed. “I don’t want it!”

His wings struggled to open against Foolish’s legs. Unfazed by Tommy’s struggle, Foolish cupped his injured hand in his own and gently pried open his bloodstained fingers. “Look at that!” His other hand pressed against Tommy’s head and ruffled his hair. “You sure did a number on yourself!”

“Shut up!” Tommy bashed his fist into Foolish’s chin. “I hate you! Shut up!”

“Let me do this, then you can scream at me all you want.” Foolish grabbed the opened potion. “Hold still.”

The glimmering liquid stung like acid. Tommy reared back with a shriek and twisted out of Foolish’s grasp, crumpling to the floor with his face pressed to the ground. Though the pain in his hand was rapidly subsiding and exhaustion had well begun its journey through his limbs, Tommy found himself screaming. Screaming wordlessly, at the top of his lungs, accompanied only by the frenzied banging of his fists against the floor and his wings against Foolish’s golden chest. *I’ve done it now*, he thought miserably. *Nobody wants Hurricane Tommy around.*

Foolish, throughout the whole ordeal, remained silent. Tommy couldn’t bear to face him once his blind rage had finally passed and kept his nose to the ground, waiting for the other awful shoe to drop with baited, shuddering breaths. His whole body felt sore, gutted, sapped of all its energy.

Now I've gone and shown him how fucked up I am. Great job, me. Idiot.

Foolish shifted behind him. "Little man," he said gently, placing his hand on the back of Tommy's neck. "We gotta fix your breathing. You sound like a blaze."

Tommy merely moaned as Foolish maneuvered him once more onto his back, this time with Tommy's head resting on Foolish's knees. "Alright, featherball. I've got a task for you. Think you can do it?" Foolish patted either side of Tommy's head. "It's very easy."

Through his tears and tremors and uncontrollable wheezing, Tommy nodded silently. *He's not mad. He doesn't look mad.*

"I want you to blow on my face for me. I had to run very quickly to come rescue you, and now I'm pretty darned toasty up in here. Think you can cool me down a little bit?"

"Huh?" Tommy whimpered.

"Like this—" Foolish blew a concentrated gust of air onto Tommy's face. It smelt of fruit. "That's all I need you to do."

The request was odd, but simple enough. Tommy sure wasn't about to try his strained luck by being any more of a maniacal dickhead. Mustering his courage and as much control of his breath he had, he began to blow on Foolish's face.

"Good job!" Foolish exclaimed. A couple strands of golden hair fell forward from his shark hood and bounced against his forehead. "I feel better already. Keep going just like that."

Minutes passed. Tommy collapsed back from where he'd pushed himself up on his elbows and closed his eyes. He felt a hand cup his cheek and pat it softly. "Good job, little feather man. You did so well."

"Why'd you make me do that?" Tommy asked weakly. "I'm pretty sure my breath smells like shit."

"You needed to calm your breathing. Cleopatra gets wheezy sometimes, when she gets stressed. I used to put sand out in front of her and let her blow it all around." Foolish's thumb moved in comforting circles against Tommy's temple. "I didn't have sand on hand, so my face was the next best thing."

Tommy sniffed. "That's smart."

"*I'm* smart," Foolish replied. "So it's only natural that I do smart things."

He stood, resting Tommy's head on the ground, and moved away for several moments. Tommy listened to him descend the stairs, only opening his eyes when he heard the familiar trill of Foolish Jr. from his perch downstairs. *Fucking shit.* There were dried splatters and smears of blood all over the floor and in his bed. His tunic and short, billowing pants were crusty and stank of sweat and metal. *What the fuck even happened?*

Foolish returned with a bolt of bandages. "Here we are," he said. "Let's get you wrapped up."

He sat down cross-legged in front of Tommy and let him shuffle awkwardly into arms' reach. "Drink up that potion," Foolish said, motioning to the bottle beside them. "I'm surprised you didn't kick it over."

Tommy grabbed it and downed it in two swigs. It hit his throat like a jolt of electricity and he coughed, wiping his mouth with a clean swatch of his sleeve. Foolish took his hand once more and began to wrap it with surprising ease. The bandages were tight but gentle against his skin, much nicer than the itchy monstrosities they had back home. When Foolish was done, Tommy pulled his hand back into his lap and inspected it. "I'm sorry."

Foolish cocked his head. "About what?"

"I had a tantrum and shit." Tommy played with one of the bandage's hems. "Sorry."

A melancholic smile spread across Foolish's face. "It's okay, featherball. I know how scary it can be to cut yourself."

"My brother used to say that people won't like me if I have tantrums," Tommy mumbled. "So thank you for not kicking me out."

"Why would I kick you out? I'm a professional little-man-carer! Plus, you're tons of fun to have around." Foolish patted Tommy's shoulder. "You're a smart kid. It's like you're built for this place."

Tommy looked down at his lap and blinked away the tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes. "Thanks," he whispered. "I'm glad you think I fit in here."

"I *know* you fit in here. So when your dad takes you home, you can come visit whenever you want," Foolish replied happily. "And you can bring your friends, too! Cleopatra loves kids."

He gave Tommy's arm a playful punch, making him smile. Had he not felt tired enough to sleep for years, Tommy probably would have given one back, just to prove how strong he was. "My dad still hasn't responded to our letter. Think he's ignoring me?" He asked with a dry laugh.

"Of course not!" Foolish pouted. "He'd never do that. I bet it just got lost in the magic-mail or whatever. We can send another one if you want."

"Maybe later. I'm in no rush." Tommy outstretched his hand and allowed Foolish to pull him to his feet. "Can we get something to eat?"

"Of course!" Foolish exclaimed. "I bet Cleopatra will be wanting some more chorus fruit. You got blood all over the first one."

Tommy crossed his arms. "I don't like chorus fruit anymore. It doesn't taste good."

"I'll cut up some cactus fruit for you — all the spikes removed, of course. I'd hate a second incident today," said Foolish with a wink. "Go change and I'll meet you downstairs. We'll get your bed all cleaned before bedtime."

Something restless settled in Tommy's soul. His hand didn't seem to hurt anymore.

Maybe today wasn't all bad.

~

George had almost forgotten how much he hated the nether.

Key word: *almost*.

Travelling on the proper highways was certainly better than traipsing through the backroads, but

George wouldn't consider it anything close to a pleasant trip. The air was as hot and muggy as he remembered; breathing was a chore, talking a slow-building torture. The nether brick beneath their horses' hooves let off a repugnant, ashy stench that left George wanting to cough at all times. Every noise made him jump, every movement made him paranoid, and George was certain that his horse was more skittish than normal.

Somehow, he managed to make it through the first two days in one piece. Phil and his sons talked endlessly and about every topic on the planet, but most of their conversations were too intense or downright confusing for George to even consider joining. Dream was no help, either — he'd completely drawn into himself. George could count the conversations they'd had on one hand. He rode at the back of the group, practically within arm's reach of George's horse, but barely spoke a word.

"Are you sure we won't get recognized anywhere?"

"Mostly, yeah." Wilbur took a stack of hay from the smiling rest post guard and tucked it beneath his arm. "You'd be surprised how many people don't really know what we look like. Without the regalia or wings—" he motioned back to the long cape masking his wings— "Most people outside our kingdom couldn't pick us out of a lineup if they tried. My dad didn't publicize many photos of on purpose." His face darkened slightly. "For these kinds of situations."

They walked back to their horses, who were all enjoying a steaming drink of potion water by the rest post. Phil and Techno were crouched by their small fire, heating the pot of nightly stew. Dream's shadowy figure moved about inside the tent he shared with George, searching for something within their bags. Wilbur dropped the stack of hay in the feeder and cocked his head in his father's direction. "Dinner should be ready soon," he said. "My dad calls it 'army stew'."

"That probably means it tastes like shit," George whispered. Wilbur grinned and gave him a punch on the arm. "What? You know I'm right!"

"It keeps for months without refrigeration when you seal it up right. I don't think it's *supposed* to taste good," Wilbur replied with a cheeky laugh. "Forgive me for not telling my dad that you have refined ration tastes."

Dinner passed as most of their meals had — uninterestingly. Dream kept strong to his apparent vow of silence and ate without a word. When he, expectedly, finished far before everyone else, he simply took his bowl and cutlery and disappeared back into their tent without so much as a thank-you. George felt the prickles of embarrassment climb his throat, but Phil stopped him before he could begin fantasizing about ripping his head off.

"Dream seems to be mentally busy," said Phil good-naturedly. "He's been a great help with the navigation, so I take no offence to his need for privacy."

George stuck another spoonful of stew into his mouth. The rehydrated beef was uncomfortably chewy, but it was better than being hungry. "He tends to get terse when things go wrong. Words aren't his strong suit."

"That sounds like someone I know." Phil elbowed Techno in the side. "So long as he's sleeping and eating properly, I'm sure he'll be in good shape by the time we reach the overworld again. I know you two have... unpleasant associations with this place."

"Who doesn't?" George said. "This place objectively sucks."

Phil puckered his eyebrows humorously. "You know what I mean."

They fell into a comfortable silence once more. Since water evaporated too quickly to drink, Phil mixed in healing potions with their water supply to help it last. *I'm going to develop a tolerance for these*, George thought, gulping back a large mouthful. His tongue was thick in his mouth, but he couldn't tell if it was the product of stress or simply because it was so damned hot in the nether. *I'd probably be more at ease if you actually talked to me for more than half a minute.*

He turned his head and stared at their tent out of the corner of his eye. Dream's movements had ceased, but the soft squeal of a sharpening stone made it clear that his anxious busyness was nowhere near finished. George sighed. "At least we have some peace of mind knowing that Dream will slaughter any piglin that dares to come within thirty feet of us."

Phil chuckled heartily. "That we do. Now—" he clapped his hands together— "Finish up and get to sleep. I'll wake us in approximately six hours. If we make good time, we could ride throughout the night tomorrow and make it to the overworld half a day early."

Wilbur passed his half-empty bowl to Techno. "I'm full. Finish it for me while I go wash my face."

Techno furrowed his thick brows. "You took like two bites," he said gruffly. "You eat it. We don't need you passing out."

"I said I'm full," Wilbur repeated, obviously irritated. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight."

He stood up with his wings fluffed behind him and walked away, hands clasped in front of him. Phil watched him go with a mournful expression. "Eat up, Techno. We shouldn't waste," he said quietly. "You are dismissed too, George. I won't make too much noise cleaning up out here."

"I can help," George began, but Phil cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"You need your rest. Perhaps you can ensure that Dream's not got something troubling on his mind. I'd hate for him to not be in a good state right now." Phil tried to smile comfortingly, but exhaustion played upon his features like the sheen of sweat. "Don't you worry about me. I'm used to handling much larger armies than this."

There was no arguing with Phil when his fatherly instincts took over. George nodded in defeat. "If you say so. If you need anything, please wake me up. I'd be happy to be any help."

He rose to his feet and brushed off a layer of red dust off his pants. "Goodnight, everybody. Let's hope we can be out of this shit place soon."

"Cheers." Techno raised his spoon like a toast as George turned away. His eyes were distant, lost in thought. *What are you thinking about?* George thought. *You are so hard to read.*

George found Dream laying atop his sleeping bag when he pushed through the tent's fabric door, still wearing his armour and mask. "Dream?" He said. "Are you asleep?"

Dream offered no response save for a wave of his gloved hand. George pursed his lips. "You'll get your bed filthy with all that armour on."

"It's fine," Dream said blankly.

George unclipped his chestplate and shrugged it off. His tunic was soaked with sweat. "It's not," he replied, "But suit yourself. Don't come whining to me when you've got grit in every pore."

"Already do."

“Well. You’re in a mood today.” George practically kicked off his leg armour and flopped back onto the sleeping bag. It was thick, better suited to the Arctic than the nether in most ways. *Perhaps sleeping on top of it wouldn’t be such a horrible idea*, he thought to himself.

The tent roof rippled and a burst of light exploded outside. “And we’re invisible,” Dream mumbled. “Thank the gods for lingering potions. I may actually be able to sleep tonight.”

George turned his head. Dream stared up at the ceiling, hands folded over his chest as though he were a body in a morgue. He was close enough for George to make out individual violet swirls on his armour, a jagged edge of a facial scar that poked out of the side of his mask, even without the light of their fire outside to illuminate the dim environment.

George swallowed. His chest ached. *Can’t you make sense for one minute, Dream? Please ?*

He stretched his arms above his head and forced out a single question. “You didn’t sleep last night?”

Dream let out a quiet huff. “I don’t need much sleep, I told you.”

“That wasn’t my question.” George scowled.

“I had a couple hours’ rest, okay?” Dream raised himself up onto his elbows. “That’s what matters. And I’ll get even better rest tonight.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to lie to me anymore,” George said.

“I am *not*, ” Dream replied in annoyance. “Stop stressing yourself out. Phil needs you in good health.”

“This is the most we’ve talked since we began this journey!” George dropped his voice to a whisper as his irritation grew. “You’re shutting me out again, I can tell.”

“I am not!” Dream sat up and clenched his fists in the material of his sleeping bag. “I just hate this place!”

“We all do! That doesn’t mean we turn into statues!”

Technoblade sneezed from within the neighbouring tent and they fell into tense silence. “I’m sorry,” Dream began in a low mumble. “I’m the only one here who isn’t a prince or a king. Forgive me for not jumping into your conversations.”

George felt his shoulders relax. “Is that really it? Ranks don’t matter here, Dream. You’re quite well-respected by this bunch.”

“Half the time I haven’t got a clue what Phil and his sons are talking about! It’s like trying to speak Ender!” Dream exclaimed. “All I do is make myself feel more stupid if I try to listen in.”

“Gods, Dream — me too!” George let out a low chuckle. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Dream’s head turn slightly to look at him. “Phil and his sons are lovely, but even I can’t keep up with their debates. And I even studied with Wilbur when we were young!”

“Well, that’s reassuring. I thought I was just an idiot.”

George shifted onto his side, pretending not to notice as Dream’s face snapped back towards the ceiling. “You can talk to me, though. I promise not to bore you.”

“You don’t bore me. That’s not why I’ve been quiet.” Dream reached up and pulled his mask halfway off his face, though he hesitated before it could crest the tip of his nose. “I didn’t realize how much being in this place affects me.”

George licked at his lips. Though their tent was comfortable and homey, the sounds and smells of the nether trickled in like a leak in a roof. Ghosts wailed at one another off in the distance, and the bubbling of the lava dozens of feet below them was a constant murmur in their ears. Even the faint smell of sulphur from the lingering potion seemed to permeate the air. Dream shifted, frowning, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I hate it here, George. I absolutely fucking hate it.”

I should have known. George scooched an inch closer. “I didn’t realize you were struggling so much.”

“Don’t blame yourself — I didn’t tell you,” Dream said. “Like you said; everyone hates it here. If you guys can handle it, then I can handle it too.”

“It’s different with you, Dream. This place made you sick.” George reached over and flicked his chestplate. “Take your armour off and get actual rest tonight. You need it.”

“No,” Dream said sternly. “I need to be ready in case something goes wrong.”

“You won’t be ready for anything if you’re deliriously exhausted!” George grabbed Dream’s arm and tugged on it. “King’s orders. Now.”

“You can’t pull that anymore,” Dream said in a snarky tone. “We’re friends now. You can’t order me around anymore.”

Friends. The word hung in the air for a moment longer than it should have. George looked away and let his fingers fall from Dream’s arm. “Then I’m saying this as a friend. Get rest. I’m right here with you.”

Dream seemed to pause. Then, with much hesitation, he pulled his mask off his face. “I’ll take off my chestplate,” he said quietly. “I can lay down better without it.”

“Thank you.” George sat up, taking the chestplate from Dream’s hands as he shrugged it off. He set it by Dream’s feet, making sure to tuck the leather straps in so they wouldn’t touch the ground. When he leaned back, Dream was already laying down, one of his arms outstretched beside him. His fingers played absentmindedly with the fabric of George’s sleeping bag. “This’ll be good for you.”

“Thank you,” Dream mumbled sleepily. His outstretched arm flexed as he spoke, rippling the muscles in his forearms as he cracked his knuckles. His face was calm, if not slightly wan, and bore a slight, nervous smile.

Oh. Something clicked inside George’s head. He shuffled closer, dragging his legs with him, and laid his head on Dream’s bicep, just before the crook of his elbow.

“There,” he said, pulling Dream’s covers up over his chest. Dream smelt of sweat and fear and home. His arm was soft beneath George’s head and trembled slightly when George’s hand came to rest on it. George closed his eyes and, for the first time since they’d crossed the portal, felt neither hot nor cold. “Goodnight, Dream.”

“Goodnight, Your Highness,” he replied, barely loud enough to be heard. George didn’t have the strength to correct him.

Lulled to sleep by the bubbling lava below, they slept.

Chapter End Notes

thank you foolish for being the only emotionally intelligent character in this entire fic
you are my little meow meow

A helium update, Phil lore, *and* a QWF video? I couldn't not update today. I am a
clout whore above all else, after all ☺

Thank you all for your replies to my last chappy! Words cannot describe how much
they help me. Thank you especially to the mlm that helped calm my worries over my
representation of an mlm relationship. Your opinions matter to me! If something ever
changes and you are not happy with my rep, then don't hesitate to contact me ♥

A good, peaceful chapter! Well, sort of peaceful. But you are know what that means
for next chapter... >:)

Another little question for your enjoyment (and mine!! Seriously yall r big brained) :
which character is characterized in your favourite way? What makes them/their POV
enjoyable to read?

I have lots of plans for the upcoming chapters. Recent lore... gave me ideas :)

Stay cheesin! I love you all!

-Ophelia

Thorns

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur never dreamed of Tommy. Ever. Aether above, his dreams were the *only* place untouched by the whirlwind presence of his younger brother. Tommy was a constant in his life, more an extension of Wilbur himself than a person of his own. He ate with Wilbur, played with Wilbur, slept in the same bed as him more days than not. Wilbur was barely able to lock the door to take a piss without having to watch Tommy's wiggling fingers slip under the door.

(Okay, he hadn't done that since he was ten, but *still*.)

Wilbur loved his brother. He loved him fiercely, loved him wholly, loved him unconditionally. In return, Tommy loved him more than he loved anyone else in the world.

Perhaps therein lay the problem.

"Dad's worried sick about you, you know."

Tommy looked up from the chess board. "It's fine."

"No it's not," Wilbur said. "You were missing for so long. We're out looking for you."

"Well, I'm here." Tommy's hand moved across the board. Wilbur couldn't seem to make out what he was doing. "I'm here."

"You are here. That's good. I need to tell Dad."

"Can I sleep in bed with you tonight?" Tommy asked. His wings were shaking, shedding feathers all over.

"Of course." Wilbur picked him up into his arms and pressed him into his chest. He was kicking, screaming, but Wilbur could neither hear nor feel it. "Of course you can. Of course you can."

"Will!" Tommy twisted out of his arms. He fell to the stone floor in a limp pile, writhing as though he was burning alive. His wings were bloody stumps. "My wings! My wings!"

He reached for Wilbur with frostbitten fingers. "I'm cold. I'm cold." His breath was icy against Wilbur's face. "Will, I'm cold."

"You can't have the fever," Wilbur said. "You're not in the nether with us."

Wilbur. Tommy twisted once more and buried his face into Wilbur's lap, screaming at the top of his lungs. *Wilbur, help me. Help me. Help me.*

Wilbur woke, heart in his throat, and barely made it out of the tent before he was sick.

"Wilbur?"

He flinched at the sound of his name. Something shuffled behind him, then he felt a warm hand press against his back. "Wilbur?"

"Dad," he said weakly. His father moved into his field of vision, dressed in his nightclothes, and

lowered himself to his knees by Wilbur's side. "Are we still invisible?"

Phil pointed up to the faint but glittering bubble over their heads. "Yep. We've got at least another hour or two before it fades. You're safe."

"Good." Wilbur pulled his knees to his chest and stared off into the red forest on the other side of the highway. It was still. "Sorry for waking you. I didn't feel well."

"Are you alright?" Phil pressed a hand to his forehead. "Do you have any open wounds? Blisters? Do you feel cold?"

Wilbur pushed his father's hand away, spurred by a sudden burst of aggression towards his tenderness. "I'm not sick, Dad. I just had a nightmare."

Phil frowned. "You've had nightmares before. You never throw up."

The words left his tongue before he could stop them. "How do you know?"

"I—" Phil pressed his lips together. "Wilbur, please. Not now."

"Go back to bed," Wilbur said softly. The sounds of the nether continued around them in a grumbling hum, equal parts frightening and calming. "I just want to be alone. I'll only be fifteen minutes at most."

"No." Wilbur felt his father's wing outstretch behind him and pull him closer as he tried to stand. "I've had enough of leaving you boys alone. I want to help you."

Wilbur buried his face in his hands. *Why now? Why act like father of the year when Tommy's not even with us?* "I want to be alone. Go away."

"Tommy would want us to work together—"

"How do you know what Tommy would want?" Wilbur hissed. "How could you possibly know? You don't even know him at all."

His father's wing stiffened against his back. *This is dangerous.* Wilbur savoured the burn on his tongue. *This is a line I've never crossed.*

"Wilbur," Phil began through gritted teeth. "I know you have much to criticize me for, but let's not —"

"You don't know him." Wilbur trained his eyes on a single tree in the distance. He wanted to punch it, sink his hands into the fleshy purple bark, and tear it to shreds while his father watched. "You haven't known who he was for years."

"*Wilbur.*" The sharpness in Phil's voice sent a jolt up Wilbur's spine. *Dangerous.* "Please. Stop that."

"*I'm* more his dad than you are. *I'm* the one he misses right now. *I'm* the one he wants the most," Wilbur said. "You know it's true."

Phil's wing retreated. Wilbur caught a glimpse of his face out of the corner of his eye — mouth drawn in to a thin line, chin puckered, eyes half-closed and blooming with redness. "I'm sorry," he whispered, standing. "But I am *trying*, Will. I barely had a chance to redeem myself with him before he was taken from me again."

Have I ever seen Dad cry before? Wilbur bit down on his cheek until he broke the skin. The pain was nice, as satisfying as scratching an itch. “You’ve got what you wanted all along. No Tommy.” The foulness of his words roused the parts of him forced into slumber by exhaustion. *For the first time in forever, I’m actually feeling something right now.* “Don’t act like you have never wanted him gone before.”

“You know that’s not true.” Phil hastily wiped his eyes. “You’re in pain and you’re taking it out on me.”

“Of course I’m in pain! Tommy is gone! Because of *you* !” Wilbur flew to his feet, hands in his hair. Guilt crashed over him; hot, strong, heavy upon his shoulders like a flaming pillory. He met his father’s eyes and felt the agony of hurt and fear hit him like a knife to the gut. Something within him was unravelling, tumbling out of his grasp too quick for his tongue to catch up. “If you’d have just been paying attention to him for one moment of your fucking life—“

“I am a king!” Phil cried tearfully. “I had a job to do! The world is crumbling beneath our feet as we speak!”

“You’re a *father* ! First and foremost!” Wilbur didn’t care that his voice had risen to a shriek, even as both tents behind his father began to stir. “We didn’t ask to be brought into this life! You chose us. You chose *Tommy*. You can’t just abandon us because we’re not mini-kings like Techno is!”

“I have not—“ his father’s voice died with a strangled whimper. He pressed a hand to his mouth and choked back a sob. “I have *not* —“

“What the hell is going on here?”

Techno pushed his way out of the tent and put a hand on Phil’s shoulder. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Techno, please,” Phil said in a shaky stammer. “This doesn’t involve you.”

Techno met Wilbur’s eyes and bored into him with barely-contained fury. “I think it does,” he replied in a low voice. “Go get the horses fed, Dad. I’ll get Wilbur back to bed. He should be able to get another half hour or so of rest if he goes now.”

“Fuck off, the both of you,” Wilbur spat. “I hate you both.”

A great wave of pain seemed to pass over his father. “You don’t mean that.”

“Right now I do.” Wilbur stuffed his hands into his pockets. “I’ll get the horses fed. Neither of you come near me until we’re ready to go.”

Techno scowled. “Wilbur—“

Phil grabbed Techno’s arm before he could finish. “Alright,” he murmured. “We’ll be here.”

My world has already crumbled beneath my feet and turned to ash. “Bye.” Wilbur turned, clenching his hands so tightly within his pockets that his nails pierced his palms. *It’s too late for you to swoop in and save me. There’s nothing left to save.*

The horses were happy to have an early breakfast. Wilbur tried to let that comfort him.

~

Well, fuck. Now things were awkward.

Dream wasn't quite sure what had happened between Phil and his sons that morning, but he knew it was bad. From the constant conversations of the day before came dead, unending silence. Silence as they ate, silence as they took the tents down, silence as they rode. Phil was barely alive behind the eyes and moved about as though he were in a trance, wings limp upon his back as if they were paralyzed. Atop his saddle, he was more a corpse than living, breathing king, staring ahead with eyes that barely moved from a distant point over the horizon. Technoblade, thankfully, was lucid enough to lead the group and get them on the road at a decent time, but even he carried a weight on his back that bent his shoulders forward and leached all the bright colours right out of him. The two of them rose ahead, side by side, like the grim head of a funeral march.

Wilbur, well...

Wilbur came to talk.

"Do you remember that game we used to play, George?"

George cocked his head. "What game?"

"The geography game," Wilbur said. He let his reins fall and sat back in his saddle, kicking his feet from his stirrups. "One of us would describe a place and make the other one find it on a map. We played it all the time when you tutored me that one summer."

George's face spread into a grin. " *That* game! I'd totally forgotten about it! That was the only way I could get you to care about geography at all."

Wilbur let out a loud laugh. Dream tried not to notice Phil's wings spasm at the sound up ahead. "You got me obsessed. Nobody else would play it with me afterwards, so I just memorized all the places myself and rattled them off whenever I felt like it."

"Gods Almighty," George chuckled. "We should play it when we get back. It'll be something to look forward to."

Wilbur turned his head towards them and grinned, eyes sparkling. He never smiled like that. Gods, he barely smiled at *all* . He'd been the same way all his life — kind, sharp-witted, and serious. A model prince; the proverbial tamer to the lion that was prince Tommy.

George made him smile like all the weight in the world had been lifted off his chest. It was a feeling Dream was familiar with. Achingly familiar.

It was also a feeling he wanted to keep to himself.

"You know, I tried to teach Tommy to play it," Wilbur said. "He couldn't handle it. Getting the answers wrong would make him freak out. Every game except chess always ended up with some sort of destruction with him."

He's got to be a saint if he's never decked that kid. Dream adjusted his mask. He could have sworn it didn't fit as nicely since Quackity had put it on. "Yikes," he muttered.

George whipped his head around and frowned as if Dream had said something wrong. Before Dream had the chance to shoot back a glare of his own, George had already turned away again. "I have a good feeling about this, Wilbur. I think we've got a good shot."

"I hope." Wilbur's eyes flitted ahead and stared at the back of his father's head. "Thank you,

George. I'm glad I have you here with me."

Dream's hands tightened on his reins. Wilbur and George lapsed naturally into a rapid conversation, throwing so many large words between them that it was hard to believe they were speaking the same language. They talked of beaches, mountains, seas, of tiny savannah towns where all the houses were made of a special red wood that never rotted. They talked like they'd been there, seen it all with their own two eyes. Gods, perhaps they had. Princes and kings could travel wherever they wanted.

You can't keep up with him, said the small voice in his head. *He's a scholar; you can't read. He'll get bored of you soon enough.*

A winding red mushroom-tree arced over Dream's head, half-grown into the netherrack wall. He reached up, wound his fingers in the stringy vines, and let them fall into his lap and shoulders as Patches carried him away. Nether flora was always odd, stuck somewhere between rubberiness and fleshiness, but Dream had always found it interesting. If nothing else, the nether and all its quirks reminded him of Bad. That alone kept it from being irredeemable.

"Dream, stop."

Dream blinked. George had his hand on his reins, pulling Patches to a halt. His face had grown serious. "There's something up there."

"What?" Dream raised himself up in his saddle. Though Technoblade had dismounted his horse and walked out in front of them with his crossbow drawn, he couldn't see anything on the highway itself. "I don't see anything."

"It ran across the path like an animal," George said in a low voice. "I barely saw it. Technoblade did."

"A piglin?" Dream unsheathed his axe. Nether flora was tolerable. The fauna? Not so much.

"Not unless the piglins you know of slink around on all fours," George replied. "Go up ahead. I don't want Techno alone if it jumps us."

"Yes, your Highness." Dream kicked Patches into motion, but she seemed to be reluctant to move more than a pace or two ahead. He kicked her again, harder this time, but she did nothing more than shuffle in place and toss her head with a nervous whinny. "Patches! What's the matter with you?"

"I'll hold her. You go up ahead with Techno," George said, leaning over to grab the reins. He had one of Sapnap's knives in his other hand. Beside him, Wilbur stared ahead with wide eyes, still as a statue.

Dream nodded. *Leaving this horse is the last thing I want to do right now*, he thought. Fighting the shivers creeping down his spine, he slipped off Patches' back and gave her a comforting pet as he passed. His axe was a calming weight in his hand, warm against his fingers. He watched the Techno's back with rapt attention as he crouched by the side of the highway, squinting into the forest beyond. "See anything?" He said.

Techno offered no reply. His eyes were focused, jaw locked. The stunning sword in his hand glimmered in the light of a glowstone patch nearby. Slowly, he raised it, then softly jabbed it into the foliage in front of him.

Something squealed. Something human.

“What the—” Dream darted forward until he was at Techno’s side. “Who’s there?”

“Shh!” Techno hissed. “You can come out now. We’re not going to hurt you.”

One of the low, weedy bushes began to rustle. Dream felt his tongue go dry. *There’s not a rest stop for miles. We haven’t seen anyone for hours. How did one person get so far out here?*

“I don’t like his mask.”

The voice was quiet, raspy. Techno blinked, then whipped his head around to stare at Dream with pursed lips. “Take off your mask. It’s scaring her.”

“What? Why?” Dream exclaimed. “I don’t want to!”

“Dream!” George hissed. He jabbed a finger at his own face. “Just take it off for now!”

Dream scowled. *Fuck this shit.* He tore it off in one motion and threaded the straps over his arm. “It’s off,” he said. “Can you come out now?”

A hand emerged from the dry vines, covered in dirt and red dust. It was a small hand, obviously human, but the nails were cracked and broken and there were more scars than Dream could count littered over the palm and fingers. *Tiny, straight scars, like thorn scratches. I’ve seen this somewhere before.*

“Here.” Techno took the small hand in his own and gently tugged the rest of the person out of the foliage. It was a young woman, covered in dirt from head to toe. There were thorny vines around her neck and wrists, brown from the nether heat. She scanned them with owl eyes, fiddling with the hems of the ragged clothes she wore.

“I’m Sherman,” Techno said with a small bow. “Are you alright? Are you lost?”

The young woman said nothing. *Fake names? Really?* Dream fought the urge to roll his eyes. He sheathed his axe hesitantly, even as the dirt-covered woman staggered forward a few steps in his direction. “I’m... Francis,” he muttered. The girl grabbed him by the arms and pulled him closer, digging her thorny vine bracelets into his wrists. Her eyes were wide, unnaturally so, more reminiscent of shining blue marbles than human eyes at all.

“Miss?” Techno said. “Are you alright?”

“Get her water,” Dream replied. “She’s delirious.”

She’s familiar, his brain added on.

Techno darted back to Phil and took a potion bottle from his waiting hands. “We can’t leave her here,” he said, uncorking it and passing it to her. “She’s in enough danger being in here without armour.” He leaned back and shouted, “Wilbur, do we have any extra armour pieces?”

“No,” Wilbur replied immediately.

“Shit.” Techno turned to Dream, frowning. “We’ll take her to the next portal. Hopefully, with some food and water, she’ll wake up enough to be able to tell us who she is.”

Something pinched Dream’s hand. One of the girl’s thorny bracelets were moving, growing, crawling down his palm. He yanked back with a shout. “The fuck?”

“What’s happening?” George cried.

“Nothing! Just—“ he rubbed at a sore spot over his thumb— “Plants. We’re fine.”

The girl pushed the empty potion bottle into Dream’s hands. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“No problem. What’s your name?” Dream asked.

The girl smiled but did not answer. Her thorny necklace shifted like a moving snake, catching strands of her long hair. “I’m like you,” she said, loud enough for only him to hear. She smelt of dirt and river water and the slight tang of plant nectar. Her stare made Dream’s hair stand on end. *Gods, I want my mask right now .*

“Well.” Techno clapped his hands. “We should be moving again. Piglins aren’t big horse fans, so we’re better off not stopping until we reach a rest point. Dream, you take her. Patches is big enough for the both of you.”

Asshole. “Alright,” Dream replied. “How far until the next portal exit?”

“At least a couple hours’ ride.” Techno swung himself back up onto his horse. “I’ll keep an eye out for any smaller portals. Some rural farmers have started making their own.”

The girl let out a pleased hum and darted to Patches’ side, scampering up into the saddle with surprising ease. When she extended a filthy hand and motioned for him to get up beside her, Dream felt his tongue go dry. “I’ll walk,” he said, though both the girl and George’s faces dropped. “I need to stretch my legs. You can have her to yourself for now for now.”

George rolled his eyes and kicked his horse forward. Dream watched him go with a frown. *Alright, then. Glad to see you’re already tiring of me.*

The girl’s hand closed over his as he reached to grab Patches’ reins. “I know who you are,” she whispered. Her nails pressed into his flesh. “I know you’re not Francis.”

Dream’s blood went cold. “You’re delirious, Miss. I’ll get you a snack for the road,” he muttered, yanking his hand from her grip.

The girl did not seem satisfied. “We’ve met before. You’re like me. You’re not a king or a prince.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Dream pulled Patches’ reins out in front of her and pulled her into a lazy walk. He could hear his heart hammering in his ears.

“You’re from the forest. I know you.”

Dream’s breath hitched. “You’ve got it wrong.”

You gave me bread when I was starving.” The girl’s hand latched onto his shoulder again, gripping with incredible force. “In return, I made you roses to to sell to the townspeople for little pretty coins. Don’t you remember?”

Dream’s breath stopped altogether. He turned, slowly, and met the girl’s staring eyes.

“...Hannah?”

SHES BACK IN TOWN BITCHES YALL WERENT EXPECTING THAT

the comments I get abt the smp girls being the villains absolutely CRACK ME UP
like damn they rly do deserve a break from the idiots

war crimes permitted for them and only them because they're smart and awesome

ohohoho our two groups draw nearer and nearer.... nothing shall go wrong at all. :) and
I guess we're finding out a little more about Dream's backstory! Won't that be lots of
fun! Luckily the boys are great at communication, especially when Dream's already
feeling jealous and inadequate! I'm sure he'll be responsible if Hannah starts to say
crazy shit.

...right?

hehe stay cheesin my friends

-Ophelia

The Shortcut

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For the first time since he had arrived in the Land of the Undying, Tommy awoke to a storm. A real storm, the kind he never had at home — rain in the Antarctic Kingdom was a summertime rarity, thunder practically nonexistent. Outside his hammock window, the skies were dark and roiled like angry snakes in a barrel. Great gusts of wind tore up patches of long grass and tossed them against the pyramid's walls. Anything past the edges of the courtyard was completely hidden by the sleets of rain.

Tommy absolutely loved it.

He remained in his hammock for the next quarter of an hour, lulled in and out of slumber by the downpour rattling against his window. A great burst of lightning filled the sky with crackling energy; it reminded him of Foolish. Foolish and his awesome trident, specifically. Extra specifically? The time he'd let him use it.

(Also known as the best day of Tommy's entire life .)

Before Foolish, Tommy had only ever seen a trident once. He'd been scarcely seven years old, still deep within the throes of nightmares about orphanages and mean adults that grabbed his arms and wings hard enough to bruise. His new room had been unfamiliar, his new brothers distant and unused to his presence, and the man supposed to be his father always locked in his office and screaming to people about things Tommy couldn't understand.

The conditions couldn't have been more perfect for running away.

In his desperation to escape, he hadn't realized there'd been a snowstorm raging outside. He'd stumbled into the blustery night in only his slippers and pyjamas, blind with panic, and didn't realize the snow was calf-deep around him until he'd already reached the tree line. *I can't turn back now!* His frazzled little brain had screamed. *They'll catch me and send me back!*

Logic, unsurprisingly, hadn't come to him so easily back then. Neither had self-preservation.

I can't feel my feet. *Tommy bashed face-first into a tree and felt his lip split.* I can't see anything either. I think I'm going to die out here.

Another tree lunged out of the darkness. Tommy dodged to the side, but his wing clipped a low-hanging branch and sent him tumbling head-first into a shallow creek bed filled with slushy, icy snow. His hand smashed into a rock and exploded with pain. His mouth tasted of blood and dirt. There wasn't a single part of him not in pain.

Fucking shit! *Tommy tried to force himself up onto his elbows but found his arms could no longer support him. He pressed his face into the ground and let out a sob.* This is where I die! I'm going to freeze to death out here or be eaten by something horrible!

"My goodness!"

The ground rumbled as if someone were stepping over him. Tommy froze, terror high in his throat, as a large hand grabbed ahold of his wings and rolled him onto his back.

“Oh!” The figure jumped. “You’re awake!”

Tommy couldn’t see them well without the light of the moon. They were large, larger than him, wearing a long, black coat with a hood. Their eyes were white and glistened like those of a possum or raccoon. When they gave him a nervous smile, Tommy realized all their teeth were pointed.

They reached for him with a sharp-nailed hand. Tommy screamed.

“Whoa! Hey!” The figure jumped back, holding out their hands defensively. Something long was slung across their back. It glittered. “I’m not going to hurt you! I’m nice!”

“Go away!” Tommy kicked his legs out. He couldn’t even find the strength to stand. “I’ll kill you!”

“You’ve got blood all over you!” Said the figure in a high squeak. “What the heck happened?”

“Fuck off!” Tommy screeched.

“Language!” The figure snapped back. “You’re too young for bad words!”

“Fuck!” Tommy’s hand pulsed painfully. “Shit! Bitch! Cock!”

The figure ripped off its hood, revealing two inky horns. Tommy’s voice died in his throat. A demon. I’m going to die here.

“You’re a sour little tart,” the figure grumbled. They took a step forward, arms outstretched. “I’m not going to hurt you. Just let me see your face.”

Tommy pressed himself into the ground as they neared, praying that someone would burst through the trees and put a sword through the demon’s chest. But nobody did. The demon’s hand curled around his face, cupping his chin in their palm. It was warm.

“Oh, you,” the demon cooed. “Where’s your home?”

“Not telling you,” Tommy grumbled.

“You have to, because I’m taking you there. You’ll freeze out here! Come on—“ the demon poked at his cheek— “Quickly now! Up! Up!”

“I can do it myself. Go away.”

“If you tell me,” Said the demon with a cheeky smile. “I’ll take you home with my trident.”

Trident? Tommy cocked his head. “What’s that?”

The demon grinned. They stood, reached above their head, and slipped a long object from the sling on their back. “This.”

It had to have been the coolest thing Tommy had ever laid eyes on. It was like a three-headed spear, made of a light blue stone covered in tiny golden veins. If he squinted, Tommy could have sworn it gave off a gentle light and hummed as if it were alive. “Whoa.”

“I know,” said the demon proudly. “Tell me where your home is, and I’ll take you on a ride with me.”

“Promise?” Tommy said.

“Promise!” The demon replied.

“Okay.” Tommy tried to sit up, but his exhausted body shook too much to allow him to do much more than wiggle pitifully. Frowning, the demon slipped a hand beneath his wings and pulled him into a sitting position. “I live in the castle over there. I’m a prince, I think.”

“You think you’re a prince?” The demon exclaimed. He leaned in, squinting at Tommy’s chest, then giggled. “I see. You have the insignia right on your jammies! How cute!”

“Yeah.” Tommy crossed his arms. This demon is stupid. I’d rather it have killed me.

“Well then, your little Highness,” said the demon, pulling Tommy onto their hip. “Let’s get you home before someone thinks I’ve kidnapped you. I’d rather not be executed and leave my robot friend unfinished.”

“Robot friend?” Tommy rested his head on their shoulder. They smelt of herbs.

“Mmhmm.” The demon rose to their feet and wrapped a protective arm around Tommy’s back. “Now, hold on tight and close your eyes. The trident’s a little faulty in the snow.”

Tommy scrunched his eyes closed. With a grunt, the demon jumped, and they lurched forward suddenly as if yanked into the air by an unseen force. When Tommy opened his eyes again, they were in a different clearing, the castle close enough to be seen through the trees. “One more jump!” Cried the demon. Tommy watched them raise the trident above their head and thrust it forward. They rocketed into the air, into the steady fall of snowflakes.

This is the coolest moment ever. Tommy wanted to reach out and touch them. Maybe I have died and this is just the afterlife.

He and the demon floated back to the ground, just behind the tree line. The demon lowered themselves and allowed Tommy to hop off their hip. “There you are,” they said gently. “Someone’s out there looking for you.”

Tommy turned and squinted at the castle’s dim shape. He couldn’t see or hear anyone. “I don’t see anything.”

“One of your brothers, I think. Pretty grey wings.” The demon patted his back gently. “Go to him, now. You’re safe.”

“Wait!” Tommy cried. “What about you?”

“I’m going home, too. It’s best if you forget about me,” the demon replied. “Not everybody likes half-demons around here.”

“But—” Tommy frowned. “I want to ride your trident again.”

“Perhaps. If I ever see you again.” The demon put a hand against Tommy’s cheek and rubbed it with their thumb. They were smiling, but somehow still looked sad. “You remind me of a little friend I have, you know that?”

“Are they cool?” Tommy said.

“The coolest. Just like you.” The demon pulled away and stepped back out of their patch of moonlight. “Go, now. I’ll stay here until I know you’re safe.”

Tommy looked back at the castle. His feet stung with the cold. "Thanks for not killing me."

"Thanks for not killing me either. Goodbye, little prince."

"Bye bye."

Tommy took a step into the open, then another, then sprinted with all his might into the golden light of the castle courtyard. A figure stood on one of the low balconies, holding a lantern.

"Tommy!" They screamed. It was Wilbur, the younger of his older brothers. "Holy shit! Where were you?"

He was upon him in a flurry of grey feathers. "What the fuck!" He shrieked, wrapping Tommy in his arms. "Are you stupid? You could have died out here!"

Tommy closed his eyes. His tongue couldn't seem to form words. Wilbur picked him up, just as the demon had, and began his hurried way back up the stairs with Tommy clinging to his side like a baby squirrel. "You're lucky Dad didn't notice," Wilbur said angrily. "And you're even luckier that Techno didn't either. They'd have freaked out and woken up all the guards just to find your stupid ass."

His breath smelt of spaghetti sauce and olives. What kind of freak eats olives with spaghetti? Tommy thought dimly. Exhaustion had him weighed down by every limb, every eyelash. He rested his head on Wilbur's shoulder and felt him tense, then freeze in place altogether. "I'm sorry," Tommy whispered. "I just got scared."

Wilbur bounced him higher on his hip, wrapping him in his wing. "He's not going to send you back. You're here for good now."

A lump rose in Tommy's throat. Don't cry in front of him! That's so uncool! He wiped his watery eyes on Wilbur's shoulder, hoping he wouldn't notice. "Okay." His voice wavered embarrassingly. "Thank you."

Wilbur breathed a long sigh through his nose, which Tommy mimicked. "I'm going to take you to Dad," he said. "Not to get you in trouble. He'll be able to comfort you."

Tommy tightened his grip on Wilbur's shoulders. "Okay," he repeated. All he wanted to do was sleep. Somehow, that didn't involve returning to his big, empty, unfamiliar room.

Wilbur shifted him again, freeing one of the hands he had tucked under Tommy's thighs to keep him in place, and threaded it in the hair up the back of Tommy's head. "Oh, child," he said simply, as neither an insult nor a term of endearment. "What are we going to do with you?"

They climbed the staircase in silence, then walked the long hall to Phil's office. Wilbur had long legs for a twelve-year-old, so the rocking of his long steps lulled Tommy into a peaceful half-sleep. His scabbing lip and bruised hand both ached, but he was warm and being held and so, so tired. Life could be worse, he thought sleepily. Might as well enjoy the nice moments while I have them.

Tommy cracked an eye open as Wilbur's steps came to a halt. They were outside Phil's chancery doors. Fancy doors, they were — tall and golden and covered in interesting little patterns. Tommy stretched his arm out to touch them, but Wilbur stepped away before his fingers could meet the intricate surface. "Actually," he said, his voice low. "Maybe I'll just bring you to my room."

Someone was yelling inside Phil's office. Their rage was palpable. Tommy felt his fists ball into Wilbur's shirt instinctively. "What's happening?" He whispered. "Is that Phil?"

“You can call him Dad,” Wilbur chastised gently. “And yeah, but he’s not mad at you. Techno says there’s an evil king that lives near us.”

“Oh.” Tommy winced as someone within the room brought their fist down on a desk, rattling the whole room. “That’s scary.”

Wilbur nodded. His grip tightened on Tommy’s body, holding him close. “Yeah. Let’s go to my room.”

Tommy slept in Wilbur’s room for the rest of the week after that. And the week after that. And the week after that.

He never did see that demon again.

Tommy opened his eyes. They felt wet, heavy. A deep ache sat in his chest. The rain outside continued down in thundering sheets.

That was a weird dream. He sat up, wiping at the moisture beneath his eyes, and stretched his bandaged hand. It was itchy. “Foolish!” He called. “Look! There’s rain!”

There came no answer. *Foolish wouldn’t be building out in this weather,* Tommy thought as he swung his legs from his hammock. “Foolish! Hello?”

Foolish wasn’t downstairs either, nor was he out in the courtyard or garden. Once he’d scoured the whole pyramid top to bottom, Tommy settled in the kitchen. Nested atop a pile of mesh bags in the corner, he snacked on some of the pre-cut cactus fruit Foolish had left out while he watched the pyramid doors. Cleopatra teleported by every couple minutes, obviously distressed, but Tommy couldn’t get close to her before she disappeared again. She, like Ranboo, wasn’t a big fan of rain. Ranboo disliked all forms of water whatsoever. It must have been an enderman thing.

Foolish stumbled through the doors moments after the last piece of cactus fruit had passed Tommy’s lips. “Foolish!” He cried happily. His joy vanished when he saw what sat clutched between Foolish’s trembling hands.

Another totem.

Foolish practically ran past him and collapsed into one of the chairs by a bookcase, turning his unblinking eyes towards the ceiling. His features were sallow, tight with anguish. “Go upstairs, featherball,” he said, his voice so unlike his own it made Tommy shiver. “I wasn’t expecting you to be awake yet.”

“Another totem?” Tommy asked tentatively. He maneuvered his way out of his makeshift nest and rose to his feet. The air around him felt thick, lacking oxygen. It was hard to breathe.

“Please.” There was ash all over Foolish’s robes. “Please, go upstairs. I just need a second.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone,” Tommy said. “You seem really upset.”

Foolish smiled, but his lips were quivering. “You’re a good little man. Big heart. But this isn’t for you to know.”

“I want to know, though!” Tommy took several steps forward, rising onto his tiptoes as Foolish tried to hide the totem in the folds of his robes. “Please? You won’t make me sad!”

“Yes I will! This kind of stuff always makes little man brains sad! It makes *big* man brains sad!”

Foolish chuckled tearfully.

Tommy darted to Foolish's side while he was busy wiping his eyes and sat on the table across from him. The totem in Foolish's hands was identical to the one he'd brought home days before, covered in a thick layer of black ash. It stank of something awful and sour and oddly familiar. Foolish himself stank, too. "You guys smell," Tommy said. "Where were you?"

Foolish rubbed at his face with a twitching hand. "It's not important. Far from here."

"Why have you got ash all over you?"

"Because there was fire. Lots of it."

"Why do you smell so bad?"

"You've got lots of questions, little man." The exhaustion in Foolish's voice sent a stab of guilt through Tommy's chest. Foolish looked down at the totem in his hands with tired eyes and wiped at it with his thumb. "I smell bad because I'm covered in dragon breath. Some people must have been trying to drag one through a portal. The dragon obviously wasn't a big fan of that."

"A dragon?" Tommy breathed. "How? I thought there were no portals in—"

His father's words flashed in his mind in stunning clarity. *The only portal in the entire continent sits within that kingdom.*

"Oh, fuck—" Tommy clapped a hand to his mouth. "You were in the SMP kingdom, Foolish! That's the only portal in the continent!"

"I don't know where that is!" Foolish cried. "But it was awful!"

The deep ache in Tommy's chest morphed into a ball of ice that grated against his rib cage. "Where was the dragon?"

"I don't know! Not there, obviously, but it left behind a massacre! Dozens of corpses, just sitting in this massive crater! Even the portal itself was damaged!"

"This is bad." Tommy jumped to his feet and stuck a knuckle into his mouth. "We need to contact my dad. I need to go home, Foolish. If the Eretians get ahold of ender dragons, then..."

He let out a distressed whine and buried his face into his bandaged hand, which then burned with the sudden movement. Foolish groaned. "Don't hurt yourself more! That's bad!"

"No! This is good! This is all good! I'm going to make it good!" Tommy said. "I'm going to go home and tell my dad everything. Then we're going to save King George's kingdom! It'll be awesome!"

"Who?" Foolish asked.

"The kingdom you were in when you got the totem? That's King George's kingdom! King Eret, who is a right old bastard bitch, took it over a little while ago, so those were probably their men trying to get the dragons out of the End. We need to contact my dad and tell him."

Tommy didn't realize he'd begun to pace from side to side. Foolish looked down at the totem in his hands once more, grit his jaw, then held it out. "There's a black box beneath Foolish Jr.'s perch. Go put that in there."

Tommy cocked his head as Foolish pushed the totem into his hands. “That’s where you keep these things? Just in a box?”

“Only temporarily!” Foolish batted him away with a grumble. “And you’d be surprised how many baddies overlook the simplest places when looking for treasures. It’s very efficient.”

“Pea brain.” Tommy turned on his heel and darted across the before Foolish could land a playful slap to his back. He fell to his knees before Foolish Jr.’s perch, waking the small creature from what looked like a peaceful slumber, and pulled out the heavy black box from within the hollow base. “This it?”

“Eeyup.” Foolish nodded. “Make sure you set it there nicely. I take good care of those bad boys.”

Tommy flipped open the lid. Another totem lay within the scraps of fabric and hay, shined and polished to perfection. “This one’s all dirty. Is that okay?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll clean it later,” Said Foolish from behind him. “How’s your hand feeling? Think you’re up to a little digging in the mud?”

“I’m always up to digging in the mud, but we’ve got work to do!” Tommy exclaimed. He placed the totem down beside its twin and wiped the ash off its little face. Foolish Jr. whirred sleepily from above him, rousing his golden feathers. *I feel like I’m burying a little body. It’s weird.*

The thought unsettled him. He was glad to push the box back underneath Foolish Jr.’s perch and rise back to his feet, hands balled into fists. “You’re taking me home as soon as possible. Can we leave now?”

Foolish frowned and averted his eyes. “Not in this weather.”

“You just travelled to go get a totem!” Tommy cried.

“Travelling with you is much harder! I’m not risking it!” Foolish rose to his feet, scowling. “We’re not leaving until this rain stops. I’m sorry, little man. That’s final.”

A rush of anger burst up the back of Tommy’s spine. “My kingdom is in danger! This whole continent could be in danger! We don’t have time to waste!”

“I said *no!*”

Every vase and figurine on the shelves rattled in their places. Foolish Jr. let out a startled shriek. Tommy only stared, breath caught in his throat, and became uncomfortably aware of how small he was compared to the looming figure glaring down at him. “I’m sorry, Tommy,” Foolish said after a long moment. He deflated, curling his shoulders forward, then crouched down on the balls of his feet and put his head in his hands. “I didn’t mean to yell. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I just want to help my family,” Tommy whispered. “They could be in trouble right now.”

“I know. I know.” Foolish pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just — tomorrow, okay? Just wait until tomorrow. I need time to think.”

“Fine. Tomorrow,” Tommy said. “Promise me that.”

“I pinky promise. You can’t break those.” Foolish held out his pinky finger with a hopeful grin. A small smile moved its way onto Tommy’s face too, despite his attempts to eschew it. He extended his hand and allowed Foolish to link their fingers together. “There. I promise.”

“Okay.” Tommy stood again, ignoring the shakiness in his legs. Foolish Jr. nuzzled into his hand.

“How about I make us some lunch?” Said Foolish. He smoothed down the front of his robes and motioned to the kitchen with a big smile. “I’ll let you choose whatever you want if you promise to come out digging for concrete with me.”

A burst of excitement chased the thoughts of dragons and corpses and totems from Tommy’s mind. He grinned.

“Deal!”

~

Though their nether travelling journeys had been nothing but confusing, one thing was strikingly clear in George’s mind: whoever this dirt girl was, he didn’t like her. Not one bit.

Dream, however, seemed to like her a little too much.

They had to have been riding for over eight hours. According to George’s meticulous (and boredom-induced) calculations, they’d passed through three fragments of blue forest, nine fragments of red forest, and one frightening patch of a soul sand valley crawling with half-reanimated piglin skeletons. Throughout it all, Dream and the dirt girl rode together at the back of the group, talking in hushed voices. Their conversations seemed to be endless, stopping only when George would circle back to them and ride by their side. Dream would barely look at him, barely acknowledge his presence at all, and all the dirt girl did was stare reproachfully if George was anywhere in her eyesight.

The moment he rode away, their hushed conversation sparked back to life. George had checked. Thrice.

“Only an hour or two more until the next rest stop,” Called Technoblade from up ahead. “We’re going to stop for dinner and let the horses rest, then ride through the night until we reach the portal to the Badlands.”

“Thank the gods,” George mumbled. “I’m so fucking tired of this place.”

Wilbur chuckled. His presence was the only thing keeping George from going downright insane. “I can’t wait until my piss doesn’t steam up when I pee. That’s certainly something I took for granted before now.”

“Gross,” George chuckled. “But I can’t say I don’t agree with you. I’m never nether-travelling again after this. The Antarctic Kingdom can be week-long trips for all I care.”

“Agreed. I can’t believe I’ve actually been reduced to *missing* the snow. It’s rather embarrassing.”

“Tell me about it.”

Dream and the dirt girl let out twin chuckles. George twisted his neck just enough to see them out of the corner of his eye — the dirt girl, half-perched atop Patches’ saddle with her chest pressed to the horse’s neck, and Dream, walking beside her, bearing a suppressed yet amused smile. He looked happy. Happier than he had when it had just been him and George trying to make conversation.

I wish that was me, whispered something nasty within him. *I wish it was me making him smile.*

“She and Dream are really hitting it off, huh?”

George blinked. Wilbur was looking back at the two of them as well, head cocked in thought.

“Who knew Dream could actually be charming.”

Dream’s mask hung forgotten from the crook of his elbow. His eyes crinkled as he talked, pulling on the ends of his scars. George swallowed. *I had to fight to see your face. Why doesn’t she?*

“Yeah. It’s good he’s keeping her entertained.”

“You have to wonder where she came from. You don’t get many street urchins in our kingdom — it’s too cold. I know that type is more prevalent with you guys, but—“

“*Was* more prevalent,” George corrected. He forced his eyes away from Dream’s face and focused on an especially large mushroom in the distance. “My dad really cracked down on them. Many fled, many stayed and fought back. Not many are left.”

Wilbur quirked a frown. “Nasty affair.”

“Lots of my knights were street urchins. Dad tried to reform them, at the beginning. Then there were too many, and they were too wild, so he lost the patience. I heard much of the surviving population travelled to the Eretian kingdom to escape.”

“Ha!” Wilbur barked. “Good riddance. Let him have them.”

There was a sour taste in George’s mouth. He reached back for his canteen, but found it uncomfortably light. When he opened it, it was bone dry. *Fuck. That’s what I get for being distracted.*

“Your Highness?”

Dream was at his side, one hand on George’s ankle. In his other was another canteen, looking deliciously heavy in his hands. “You’re out,” he said simply.

George jolted. “Oh, uh — thank you. I thought I was about to go thirsty.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen,” said Dream with a smile. His freckles seemed darker in the nether heat, casting a speckled constellation over his nose and cheeks.

“Maybe I’ll give you a raise once we get out of here.” George fought to keep the fondness from his voice. *Perhaps you don’t hate me just yet.* “As a reward.”

“You don’t even pay me!”

“Then maybe I’ll start!”

“You’re so stupid.” Dream turned, tossing a roll of his eyes over his shoulder. George bit on his lips to keep from smiling. “That water’s got a bit more potion in it than normal. We’re getting a bit low on our supply with the extra mouth.”

George snapped his eyes up to the dirt girl, still perched atop Patches like a lounging cat. She stared back at him, still as a waiting predator, eyes filled with detestation. Though they locked eyes for a mere moment, the intensity of her hateful stare left George with a pit in his stomach. Dream returned to the girl’s side, seemingly unaware of the animosity in the air, and grabbed Patches’ reins from her outstretched hands. He chuckled when she whispered something in his ear.

George would have given up every jewel in his crown to have known the words spoken between them. *I want more of that. More of the banter, the comfort. I need to know you don't hate me.*

Despite his eagerness to be out of the nether, he felt a twinge of sadness that they wouldn't be setting up camp at the next rest post. Night brought them privacy; hushed conversations through the darkness and mornings where George would wake up with his head still curled into Dream's shoulder. Night brought little morsels of tenderness that George felt so awfully desperate for.

Night brought him Dream — the side of him he only allowed George to see.

George tightened his grip on the reins. *Only an hour or two more until you're out of my hair, dirt girl. Good riddance.*

~

Dream didn't have friends in the forest. Friends were a liability; an extra mouth to feed at best and a betrayal waiting to happen at worst. Though he grew to know the other urchin children that frequented the same places he did and even allowed them to curl up next to him on the harshest nights, Dream never spoke to them, nor did he allow them to call him by any name. He survived just as well alone.

Hannah, however, was different. She was perhaps the closest thing to a friend he ever allowed himself to have. Armed only with endless handfuls of roses, she was as little of a threat to Dream as she could be. When begging and hunting wouldn't suffice to feed them, she'd summon her beautiful flowers from the ground right at Dream's feet and allow him to pick as many as he could. Then he'd trot into town, her following behind him on all fours, and sell them for scraps of food or coins. Even in winter, no matter how much frost there was on the ground, her roses bloomed in every colour there was.

It was odd to see her again, suffice to say.

"It's so nice to see you alive," Hannah said, petting the nose of Wilbur's horse. "I was certain you'd been executed when I heard that the king's horses had chased you out of the forest."

Dream took another bite of his soup. It didn't taste like much, but it felt nice to eat something other than dry crackers. "I was pretty sure of that too. But, now I'm here. I've had this job for almost a decade now."

"You work for him?" Hannah pointed a finger at George, sat over with Wilbur in the shade of an overgrown mushroom. "His guard?"

"Yep. Pretty official business. George's father was quite insistent that he get a bodyguard early."

"And these?" She twisted, resting her finger against the side of Dream's nose, right on a scar. "Those came from him?"

"Not *from* him, per say. I saved him from an assassin just over five years ago."

"Hrm." Hannah's lips pursed. Her thumb joined her finger on his face and pinched his cheek playfully. "Did he say thank you?"

"Yes," Dream said with a smile. "George is very thankful for me. We're good friends."

"He looks spoiled," she whispered.

A laugh escaped him before he could stop it. George looked up and glared at him. *Did he hear her?* Dream gave her leg a gentle swat, chuckling nervously. “Don’t say that so loud! I don’t want to get yelled at.”

“It is true.” Hannah pulled the spoon from his hands and scooped her own large bite of soup. “He can’t be mad at me for telling the truth.”

Dream let out a sigh. “Oh, stop it. These are good kings, I promise.”

“Good kings are rare,” Hannah replied at a gravelly mumble. “I do not trust them.”

“Well, they’ll keep you safe anyway. The next portal should be coming up soon enough, now that we’ve reached a rest post. We’ll send you off with a bit of food and water and—“

“Where are you all going?” Hannah interrupted. “You’re not in royal gear. Are you hiding from someone?”

“The Land of the Undying,” Dream said. The words felt heavy on his tongue. “And we’re rescuing someone.”

“The Land of the Undying?” Hannah’s eyes sparkled with... recognition? “Is there a pyramid there? With a beacon?”

“I think so. There’s a pyramid, at least.” Dream raised an eyebrow. “Why? Have you been there?”

“Yes. That’s why I got stuck in here! I got chased out.” She leaned in until their shoulders were touching and turned her head to whisper in his ear. “*By a totem god.*”

“What?” Dream’s hands tightened on his bowl so hard that it creaked between his fingers. “You were there?”

Hannah dropped the spoon back in his bowl and looked down, fiddling with her thorny bracelets. “Mmhhh. I went to ask for food because I was starving. He chased me out with a massive trident. It was scary.”

“Everyone, stop!” Dream ordered. Everyone’s heads snapped up to look at him. “Hannah, repeat what you just said.”

Hannah seemed to shrink in on herself with the eyes of the group bearing down on her. Dream put a comforting hand on her leg. “Hannah was in the Land of the Undying,” he said. “That’s how she got stuck here.”

“What? How?” Phil dropped the firewood in his hands with a resounding crash.

“There is a portal right in the temple. It’s massive,” Hannah said quietly. “I snuck through it when the totem god wasn’t looking.”

“Did he have a child with him? Blonde, thin, cream-coloured wings?” Phil’s breathing went ragged. “Did you see anyone there besides the totem god himself?”

Hannah didn’t answer for a moment. Her eyes focused on something far away. “Oh,” she murmured. Her eyes grew wide. “Oh, oh—“

She stiffened with a strangled shriek and tipped sideways off the small log she was sharing with Dream. Dream caught her as she fell, but she practically threw herself out of his arms and collapsed

onto the dusty nylum in a tight ball. “The child!” She shrieked. “Oh, gods! The poor child!”

“What? What?” Phil was upon them in the blink of an eye, grasping at Hannah’s wrists as she squirmed around. “What was wrong with him?”

“I can’t say!” She wailed. “Don’t make me say it!”

Phil let her go and she curled herself around Dream’s leg, shaking like a leaf. Unable to form a single coherent word, Dream looked up at Phil, who was more animated than he’d been all day. “We’re leaving now,” he said. “Everyone! Pack up! Get the horses ready!”

Techno sprung to his feet immediately, Wilbur following at his heels. George looked frozen in place for a moment, unable to move. He locked eyes with Dream and opened his mouth ever so slightly, drawing in a great, shuddering breath.

“Hannah.” Phil knelt in front of them and grabbed one of Hannah’s hands in both of his. “You said there was a portal right in the temple. Do you remember where it is?”

Hannah nodded shakily. “Yes.”

“Can you take us there?”

“I think so.”

“Good.” Phil stood, his face a stony mask. “I’m going to burn that place to the ground if anything has happened to Tommy. I promise I will.”

With that, he turned on his heel and darted off to Techno’s side with the horses. Dream glanced at Hannah out of the corner of his eye, and surprisingly, found her smiling.

“Hannah?”

Her smile dropped immediately. She looked up at him with wide eyes. “Yeah?”

“You’ll be alright. I’ll keep you safe.”

Hannah squeezed his hand. “Good. Thank you.”

Dream looked back up to where George had been sitting. He was gone.

Here we go.

Chapter End Notes

mamma fucking mia

you all asked for jealous Dream and I gave you jealous George because im a bastard like that

wow! Everything is coming together so nicely. I reckon we’ll have a happy reunion next chapter! <3333 so nice of Hannah to lead them directly to tommy <3333 she’s a dirt queen with no secret motivations whatsoever <3333

and,,, we draw closer and closer to the Chekhov's Gun,,, five points to anyone who guesses what it is! I've already seen some right answers ;p

on an unrelated note, please follow my tumblr! I always post my updates there :)
@opheliabloo!

Once again, thank you to those who leave kudos and comments!!! We're almost at 1500 kudos and 1000 comments!!!! They make me so so so so happy and I'm happy to answer any questions you guys have!

stay cheesin!

-Ophelia

Reunion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rain did not stop. It did not stop at dusk, when the thunder finally faded and the buzz of electricity in the air waned into nothingness. It did not stop when the moon was high in the sky, faintly visible against the grey wall of clouds. It did not stop at dawn, when the gentle breath of morning wind rattled Tommy's window and sucked the hope straight out of his bones.

Tommy decided he no longer liked the rain at all.

The morning dawned cold and tense and... off. Foolish seemed to be everywhere and nowhere all at once — Tommy barely saw the man himself, given how he'd left Tommy to his space after another spectacular tantrum at daybreak, but every part of the pyramid seemed alive with random noises. *Cleopatra, probably*, Tommy thought glumly, face buried in his pillow. *She doesn't seem to like yelling.*

He couldn't bring himself to drag his body out of bed and face the fact that he'd be sitting on his ass for another day, unable to help his family if they were in danger. The thought made his stomach twist, made his fists want to meet hard surfaces and destroy anything and everything in his path. The Eretians had already taken enough — Tommy was not about to let them drag hell-dragons into the world and fuck up everything else.

His stomach grumbled. Tommy breathed a long groan into his pillow.

Though he found little solace in his breakfast, seeing the little pieces of star and heart-shaped fruit left out for him in the kitchen made warmth bloom in his chest. Fruit was always plentiful in Foolish's house, enjoyed by all — Tommy found scraps in different rooms almost every day. *And Foolish still tells me Cleopatra needs my help to open up chorus fruit.* Tommy popped another bite into his mouth. It was sour. *Yeah, right. I bet she secretly tears into them like a maniac. I'm onto her.*

Thunder boomed in the distance. Tommy buried his face in his hands. "Fuck off!" He cried aloud. "Just let me go home!"

He rose to his feet in a burst of frustration, grabbed the bowl of fruits in one hand, and chucked it against the pyramid doors with all his might. The terracotta shattered in a burst of red dust, splattering juice and half-eaten fruit slices on the doors and floor. "Fuck!" Tommy felt a lump rise in his throat. Another clap of thunder rumbled mockingly in his ears. "I hate this! I hate you!"

He grabbed a cloth from the kitchen counter and darted to the doors with guilt heavy on his back. The absolute *last* thing he needed was for Foolish to walk through those doors and see the carnage Tommy had left of his nice gesture. However, after futile moments of scrubbing at the congealed juice and trying to pick up the sharp shards of terracotta without slicing open more of his hand, Tommy eventually opened the one of the doors, gathered as much of the wreckage as he could into his cloth, and threw it into one of the bushes. *The rain will wash it all away*, Tommy thought as he pulled the door closed. *I'll apologize to Foolish later. I just need to relax.*

He leaned his head against the door and sucked in a quiet, shaky breath. For a couple moments, he dared not even move. *I'm learning to control the hurricane*. The thought was as much a reassurance as it was an order. *I'm going to show Dad. I'm going to show Wilbur.*

The wind outside moaned like a dying animal. Tommy clenched his fists. *Foolish shouldn't be out in that weather. Maybe I should go—*

A door behind him creaked open. Tommy jumped. “Foolish?” He said softly. There came no answer. The pyramid went dead silent. Tommy turned.

The person who stood in Foolish’s kitchen was not Foolish.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tommy’s wings hit the door as they flew open, feathers puffed. The person stared at him with wide eyes. It was a young man, no older than Wilbur, dressed in wrinkled clothing. He had dark hair buzzed close to his head like a soldier. “Who the fuck are you? Answer me!”

The young man said nothing. His hand slid up his leg, disappearing behind his back. Tommy felt a jolt of terror run up his spine like lightning.

He tried to run.

The flying knife was faster than him.

“*Foolish!*” Tommy’s legs buckled as the blade whizzed across his face, leaving a hot trail of agony in its wake. The young man barrelled into him from behind and hurled the both of them to the ground. “Foolish! Help—“

The young man clapped his hand over Tommy’s mouth and squeezed. “Shut up,” he hissed. The roughness of his filthy hands against the fresh wound in Tommy’s face made Tommy near blind with agony. The acrid stench of blood filled his senses and left him choking, trembling, grasping at nothing as the young man flipped him onto his back and unsheathed something from his belt.

“You idiot, Jack! This was supposed to be an ambush!” A female voice seethed.

The young man grabbed Tommy’s hands by the wrists and forced them beneath his knees. “Make fucking do! Find the damn things before that totem god comes back!” He leaned in close and pressed another blade to Tommy’s forehead, just above his eyebrow. “Where are the totems, kid? Where does he hide them?”

“I don’t know!” Tommy gasped as the young man pressed down hard on his injured hand. “I swear! I don’t know!”

“I know they’re in here! You were talking about them with him!”

“Fuck you!” *How long have they been in the temple?* Tommy’s brain was a whirlwind of pain and terror. “Foolish! Help!”

With a grunt, the young man dragged his blade across Tommy’s forehead, spilling blood down his eyes and nose. Tommy cried out instinctively, only to feel the young man’s hand close once again over his mouth. “I’ll do much worse than that,” he said in a low voice. “Tell me where the totems are. Now.”

Tommy was almost in too much pain to speak at all. *They don’t know where they are. They didn’t see me put them away. They didn’t hear us say where they were.* “I don’t know!” He repeated against the young man’s palm. His mouth tasted of blood. “Please!”

“You’re lying!” Excruciating pain spread up Tommy’s arm as the young man bore his weight onto his injured hand. He felt the scab stretch, then rip open with a sickening pop. “I know you are!”

“Jack!” The female voice repeated. “Stop being so loud!”

“Then you come here and force it out of him!” The young man said in a growl. “*Nikki!* Are you even listening to me?”

Nikki. Jack. Recognition filled Tommy’s veins like ice water. *Eretians.*

He pulled his uninjured hand from under the young man’s knee and swung with all his might. His knuckles collided with the young man’s chin, stunning him long enough for Tommy to wrench him sideways and scramble blindly to his feet. “Foolish!” He opened his wings and launched himself into the air, wiping furiously at the blood crusting over his eyes. Another flying knife grazed his calf. He hit the ceiling hard and went limp, body numb. *Please, gods. Help me, help me, help me.*

His body hit the ground just as the air filled with the roar of rain. A shadow bent over him, blocking the light, and pulled him into their arms. A thunderous boom erupted from their chest and filled Tommy’s spinning head with static.

“*Get the fuck out of my temple!*”

~

Though there was no wind in the nether, the hot air whizzing by Dream’s face felt as biting as any frigid breeze. The melodic sound of their horses’ galloping hooves echoed in his ears, as calming as it was foreboding. Dream leaned forward, pressing himself to Patches’ mane, and focused his eyes just past the back of Technoblade’s head, into the gnarled blue trees flying by them faster than he could blink. Hannah’s hands tightened on his shoulders, grounding and steady.

“How much farther?” Technoblade screamed.

“Keep straight!” Hannah cried back. “It is not on the path!”

George’s figure cantered into his peripheral vision, bent low over his horse like one of the lithe jockeys he used to like to watch at the races. *And you said you couldn’t ride well,* Dream thought with an internal chuckle. *Now look at you.*

The blue forest opened into a rocky basalt delta, submersing them in white fog. Hannah started. “Right! Now!”

Technoblade practically careened off the nether brick path and the rest of them followed suit, slowing to an unsteady trot as their horses dodged small lava pools and ever-growing stalagmites of hardened lava rock. Hannah raised herself up over Dream’s shoulder, scanning the area with wide eyes. “Keep going!” She cried.

Dream felt his nose fill with the stench of ash and grimaced. Of all the nether biomes, basalt deltas were his least favourite. His hands tightened on Patches’ reins as she shuffled sideways, spooked by a bubbling delta. “How much farther?” He murmured back to Hannah.

She pointed to a small mountain on the other side of a steep outcrop. “The mountain,” she said. “It is in there. It is big.”

A shiver of fear ran down his spine like a drop of sweat. *Hang in there, Tommy. We’re coming.*

“I see it!” Wilbur cried. “It’s fucking massive!”

A corner of the portal crested the mountain’s jagged side as they forced their horses across the

blackstone cliffs, stark against the suffocating grey. Dream's fingers went cold. *What's on the other side of that portal? What's waiting for us?*

Before he knew it, the portal loomed in front of them, half eaten by the mountain in which it had materialized. It was taller than any of the official travel portals by almost double and hissed like a den of angry snakes. Phil slid off his horse, chin high, and walked just far enough to be within reach of the roiling purple haze. His hand lifted, fingers outstretched, but Hannah stopped him before he could touch the obsidian with a small squeak. "Please," she whispered. "Not yet. You all have to listen to me."

Phil turned to look at her. For a moment, he was a king again, unfazed by whatever beast lay in waiting on the other side. "Go on. You have our ears."

"That totem god," Hannah began softly. "You cannot wait for him to strike first. He is not a creature of mercy, and that trident can kill with a single blow. If you want to save what remains of that boy, the totem god cannot live."

Phil winced as if he'd been slapped across the face. "We don't turn to violence unless we have to, Hannah."

"You *do* have to! Your only chance of survival lies in ambushing him! Once he's got the upper hand, all of you are dead." She paused. "All of us."

Phil turned away, but Hannah continued. "You'll jeopardize the safety of your boy with your pacifism. Know what you want and take it, Phil. That's what a king does."

Dream's eyes drifted to George. He sat straight up in his seat, oddly still, staring at Hannah with something in his eyes Dream couldn't place. Horror? Trepidation? Recognition? He couldn't tell. George noticed him staring and his expression abruptly changed to what Dream thought was supposed to be a reassuring smile. He couldn't smile back with his mask, so he cocked his head and gave him a small thumbs up.

Hannah's hand bore down on his shoulder and squeezed hard. "Are you listening to me?" She snapped in his ear.

Her voice was uncharacteristically sharp. Dream nodded quickly, and her grip on him softened. "Sorry," she murmured, leaning into his back. "I'm just scared for you. You are walking into a death trap."

"I'll protect you." Dream reached back and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about that."

"Where are we putting the horses?" Said George. "Can't leave them in this hellscape. Too dangerous."

"They're trained to stay where they are unless in immediate danger," Phil said. "We'll be leaving them by the portal itself for a quick escape. If we're lucky, this won't take too long." He cracked his knuckles. "Hannah, where is the portal located within the temple?"

"At the back, just outside the courtyard itself. Close enough to be at the pyramid within seconds of flying."

"Perfect." Phil drew his sword from his back. It was formidably vicious, almost as long as Phil's entire leg, but he carried it as though it weighed no more than a stick. "I'll go first. Techno, you take the back."

“Fat chance.” Techno trotted to the front of the group and pulled his father behind him with a gentle tug on his shoulder. “I’ll go first. Dream, you follow suit. I want you and your axes nearby if we’re jumped.”

“I’ve got Hannah,” Dream said, pushing his horse forward a step. “Is that okay?”

“Huh?” Techno’s horse shied away from the purple mist with a nervous whinny, making him grunt in annoyance. “Yeah, okay.”

He disappeared into the portal with another kick to his horse’s flanks. Dream let Patches carry him closer, but he couldn’t help but wince as the purple particles began to land on his arms and Patches’ mottled mane. Hannah pressed herself into his back, breathing shakily against his neck. *Oh, gods. Here we go.*

He pushed Patches forward and, with a small breath, let the portal consume him.

Rain. That’s what he noticed first. Rain, beating down against his armour in frigid sheets. Patches shrieked as thunder boomed above them, staggering sideways through rain-soaked sand. Water trickled down into Dream’s mask, blinding him, and he fought to blink it away as three blurred figures exited the portal behind him. “Shit!” He heard Phil scream. Another clap of thunder rattled through Dream’s skull and he wrenched his eyes shut, forcing his frazzled brain to recalibrate.

“Fuck this!” Someone’s wings opened with a great whoosh. “I’m going up!”

“Forward!” Hannah commanded. “There’s the pyramid!”

Dream forced his eyes open and had to hold back a squeak of terror. Before them loomed a colossal temple, at the centre of which sat a golden pyramid glimmering in the rain. Without thinking, Dream kicked Patches into a fast canter. *Tommy’s in there*, his brain screamed. *He’s in there and he needs you.*

The pyramid grew larger as he neared, stretching far up into the sky. There was a beacon at the top, blazing out of the pyramid’s peak and into the roiling clouds. Wilbur’s blurry figure circled above them like a vulture, his long coat billowing behind him with each flap of his powerful wings. Over the roar of the rain and the beating of hooves, Dream could hear nothing.

He ended up not needing to. Two ornate doors at the front of the pyramid burst open with enough force to knock them right off their hinges. A figure sprinted out, holding something over their shoulder. Dream yanked Patches to a halt and practically threw himself off her back. “Go where it’s safe!” He screamed to a wide-eyed Hannah. “I’ll handle this!”

He unsheathed an axe and felt adrenaline hit his veins like a bolt of lightning. *I’m coming, Tommy.* His feet pounded against the wet sand. He was going so fast he could have been flying. *I’m coming.* The features of the figure began to clear as he neared — golden hands, thick lines of muscle on his calves and forearms, a hood that arched over the god’s head like the open mouth of a shark. He had blood on him. So, so much blood. The figure slumped over his shoulder had wings. *We’re here, kid. You’re safe now.*

The blunt end of his axe caught the totem god by the back of the ankle, sending both he and Tommy crashing to the ground. Tommy’s limp figure rolled several feet, stopping only as Dream practically threw himself upon his back and dug his fists into his blood-covered feathers. He was warm. Gods, he was *warm*. A cry wrenched its way from Dream’s throat. He grabbed him by the shoulder and flipped him over. “Tommy—“

The world around him ground to a screeching, bloody halt.

Somebody had torn open Tommy's face.

Dream ran his thumb over one of the slashes. There was one on his forehead, right above his eyebrow. The other dead lay dead centre on his poor little face, slicing straight through the bridge of his nose. Both were deep enough to reach bone. He felt cold. Everything felt cold. Tommy's eyes opened, rolling, two specks of blue amongst a sea of red. There was blood down his chin, down his throat, down his chest. He was drowning in it. Dream was freezing. He could not feel his legs, his feet, his fingers. Tommy opened his mouth and a burst of blood came forth, splattering against Dream's mask.

He looked up. The god was reaching for them, terror etched into his golden features.

An inferno detonated in Dream's chest.

He lunged.

"Get off me!" The god wrenched himself sideways, narrowly missing Dream's axe as it buried itself into the sand. Dream swung again, fighting numbness as he forced his hands to bring the axe down hard on the god's chest. The god caught his blade and wrenched it from his hands, snapping it in two as if it were no more than a toy. There was a thick slash in his palm, bleeding gold onto the sand. His mouth opened and screamed something to the wind.

Dream did not listen.

The god hurtled into him before he had the chance to unsheathe another axe. Dream's back hit the ground hard, knocking his mask askew. There was saliva dripping from his lips, flying into the god's face with every word he screamed. He couldn't hear what he was saying. His ears had filled with fire and blood and rage so blindingly hot it choked the air from his lungs. The god held his shoulders down and smacked him against the ground once, twice, until Dream's head was spinning.

He looked to the side. Tommy was on his feet, swaying. The god stood, moving in slow motion, and turned back to the pyramid. He was gone faster than Dream could blink.

Leaving, you fucking coward? Dream rose to his feet. There was fire on his tongue, in his nose, in his ears. *I'll rip you to shreds.*

Someone grabbed his hand. It was Tommy. He fell forward and Dream caught him, wrapping him in his arms. The stench of blood hung off him like rotted flesh off a dying man. "Eretians!" He coughed into Dream's ear. "Eretians!"

The word bounced off Dream's brain and dissolved in the flames. *That fucking god.* He nodded, and Tommy's face lifted with relief. *I'll kill him. I'll kill him for you. You're safe.*

He ran until the rain stopped above his head, until the wet sand beneath his feet became sandstone. Tommy clung to him, screaming something he could not understand. His eyes could barely open with all the blood crusted in his eyelashes. When they reached the pyramid doors, Tommy fell from his arms and staggered forwards. The god stood before them, facing away, hand outstretched in front of him. Dream unsheathed his axe and felt a smile split his face. *I've got you now.*

A familiar face over the god's shoulder brought the still world roaring back to life.

"Where the fuck are they?" The pink-haired woman screamed. She was dirty, sweaty, the remnants

of purple bruises still present beneath her eyes. In her filthy hands sat an massive, ornate trident. “Tell us! Where the fuck are they?”

“Put that trident down!” Roared the god in reply. “You’ll kill us all!”

“Bullshit! Tell us where the fucking totems are!” She jabbed the trident forward, giggling as the god shied back. His hands flew out to either side. *Is he protecting us?* Dream’s jaw began to tremble. *What the fuck is going on here?*

“Don’t attack him!” Tommy grasped the back of Dream’s armour desperately. Dream’s eyes moved past him, to George and Hannah’s figures sprinting through the doors. Hannah locked eyes with Tommy and her eyes filled with fire. Tommy jolted as if he’d seen a ghost. “No—“

Thorny vines exploded from nowhere and ripped Dream’s axe from his hands. *No!* Dream dropped to his knees as it fell and grabbed it before the vines could drag it away. When he looked up again, Hannah had moved past the god and into the middle of the floor, holding Tommy by the hair. An angular young man beside the pink-haired woman grinned so widely his lips curled back into nothing. “Hannah, you fucking genius.”

“ *What?* ” The word came forth before Dream could stop it. “You’re with them?”

Hannah tossed Tommy to the ground and planted a foot on his back when he tried to get up. “If you had a fucking brain on your shoulders, you would be too.”

“Wha— how?” The fire in Dream’s chest spluttered and died, leaving him with only ashes. “Your friends tried to kill me! They’re murderers!”

“And you’re not?” Hannah sneered. “Do you know how many of our men you killed in Manburg? How many of my *friends* died that day?”

“We were defending an allied kingdom! *You* were the ones who invaded!”

“Don’t raise your voice at me.” Hannah leaned more of her weight onto Tommy’s back, making him whimper. “You’re just like them now. I can barely even recognize you.”

“They gave me a life!” Tears sprung into the corners of his eyes. “King Eret is a tyrant!”

“King Eret took our kind in once King George and his blasted father got too tired of trying to force us into slave labour. King Eret gave us a home. Gave me a home.” Hannah’s face twisted. “What did King George give you? Lifelong servitude and a knife to the face?”

“I am proud of what I do,” Dream said through gritted teeth. His legs were shaking. He could not stop them. “I took that knife to the face to save someone I cared about. You’d do the same for King Eret.”

“King Eret wouldn’t get themselves in that situation in the first place. They’re smart. That’s why they make a better king than both the fools in here combined.” Hannah locked eyes with him. Her thorny vines moved about her like snakes. *You’re not the girl who gave me roses so I wouldn’t starve*, Dream thought with a chill. *You’re just a shadow of King Eret. There’s none of you left in there.*

“King George will rid himself of you when you’re no longer of service, Dream. The moment you’re not able to prove yourself worthy of his scraps, he’ll throw you to the wolves, just like he did to the rest of us he couldn’t tame.” Hannah grabbed a fistful of Tommy’s hair and wrenched him upwards. “Enough of this shit. Tell us where the totems are, or watch the child die. Your

choice, totem god.”

“I’ll tell you where they are if you put down the trident,” the god said slowly. There were tears rolling from his emerald eyes.

“No!” Tommy shrieked. “Foolish! Don’t!”

“It’s okay, little man! You’ll be okay!” The god’s hands trembled as he stretched them out. “Put down the trident. Please.”

“And let you grab it?” Said the angular young man. “Nice try!”

“I’m serious! It’s dangerous!” The god replied in a tight cry. “It’ll kill us all if used incorrectly.”

The angular young man spat at his feet. The pink-haired woman took Tommy from Hannah’s hands and passed the trident to the young man. “You have five seconds. Totems, now.”

The god’s face fell. “Please, don’t—“

“Five!” The young man raised the trident over the back of Tommy’s neck. “Four!”

“Don’t do it!” Tommy screamed. “It’s not worth it!”

“Three! Two!” The pink-haired woman scowled. “One! Ze—“

“Beneath the bird perch! In a black box!” The god fell to his knees and let out a sob. “There’s two in there. That’s all I have, I swear!”

“What about that thing?” Hannah pointed to a small golden creature cowering on the bird perch in the corner. “He’s a totem.”

“He’s already been brought to life! His powers won’t work!” The god drew in a shuddering gasp. “Don’t kill him, please. He’s useless to you. You can have the totems!”

The pink-haired woman grinned. She darted to the bird perch and pushed it to the ground, letting it shatter upon the floor as she lifted a black box into her arms. “It’s not even locked.” She burst into hysterical laughter. “It’s not even fucking locked! How stupid are you?”

The god closed his eyes and winced. “I gave you what you wanted. Put down the trident and give me Tommy. I’ll let you leave without any trouble.”

The angular young man lowered the trident, bouncing it between his hands like a sports ball. “We’ve been lied to before by this bunch.” He jabbed the trident in George’s direction. The god jolted. “Trident’s going nowhere.”

Glass shattered in the room above them and everyone paused. After a moment, the pink-haired woman rolled her eyes and returned her attention to the box in front of her. She flipped the lid of the box open and her eyes widened. “Nice,” she whispered. “These’ll be useful.”

“Good.” The angular young man smiled. “Then we’ll be on our way. All of you, get out of the doorway and line up against the walls. Now.”

Everyone moved without a word. Dream’s feet barely felt like his own. He caught sight of George lining up against the opposite wall with Phil, but he refused to meet his eye. His face had lost all colour. Phil looked even worse.

Technoblade grabbed Dream's shoulder and squeezed until it hurt. "Don't you dare do anything stupid," he whispered through gritted teeth. Fear, which looked unnatural upon the prince's face on a normal day, had twisted his features until he was almost unrecognizable. "We can't risk him."

"I wasn't going to." Dream closed his eyes. He felt sick. "I promise."

"Shut up!" The angular young man screamed. "Nikki, Hannah — get the pearls ready and meet me outside. I'll finish up here."

Both girls nodded. With one last reproachful look, Hannah gathered her vines back into her bracelets and scampered after the pink-haired woman on all fours. Dream couldn't tell if he was hurt or happy to see her go.

The angular young man stood in silence for several moments after the girls disappeared, staring into the storm still raging outside. When he finally focused his eyes again, they centred on Phil. "I was there in Manburg, you know. When you and your army—" he paused, then laughed emptily—"Re-invaded. I lost so many people. So many friends. I was lucky to still have Nikki and Hannah by the end of the day."

He moved to Tommy's side and pressed him into the ground with one of the trident's points. "You all went home without a single casualty. Not even that king, who swore to give up his life."

"I gave you the totems. Let the boy go," the god said. "We had a deal."

The angular young man raised his chin and snarled. "Fuck your deal. *We* had a deal with King George, and look how that turned out." He met George's eyes and smiled toothlessly. "On behalf of King Eret, I'm taking what we're entitled to. A life for a life."

No. The young man grabbed the trident in both hands and swung it above his head. Dream tried to move, but his feet were frozen. The air went still. *No, no, no, no, no.* Phil opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. The buzzing of the trident filled Dream's ears. "Tommy—"

"Get off of my fucking brother!"

With a flash of grey, the world erupted around them.

Chapter End Notes

philza voice boosh

Low chance of another update quite soon? I haven't decided. my brain is a wee bit frazzled but I also have a little more planned. I just watched the Passerine animatic and I'm Feeling so I want to spread the pain.

And!!! V important question for you guys: how did you find this fic? Through a tag? If so, which one? A recommendation? Through tumblr? TikTok? I'm very interested to know! Gotta make sure I'm getting Optimal Clout™

And to those who guessed the trident as the Chekhov's gun — o7, my dear smart friends. I look forward to seeing the aftermath of dear old Foolish's advice, so foolishly unheeded. Mr. Manifold's ego is a rightly frightful beast!

in short: lol L

-Ophelia

Wilbur

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Burnt feathers smelled bad.

What happened? Tommy rose to his feet. The world around him spun, fading in and out of focus to the tune of the pounding in his skull. *I want to go home.* He staggered forward and fell, landing on his hands and knees. *Everything hurt. I want home. I want Wilbur. I want Dad.*

Someone was screaming. Tommy couldn't hear it well. His head felt like it was full of cotton balls. Around him, everyone was on the floor — even Foolish lay curled against the wall, motionless. A figure on the other wall stood, fell, then stood again. “Dream?” Tommy’s throat ached. “What happened?”

Dream’s mask was cracked down the middle, like Wilbur’s little teacup that Tommy had once slammed a little too hard down on the table. He reached up and pulled it off in one motion, revealing a pale, scarred face beneath. “Dream?” Tommy repeated. He raised his arms. *I want to be picked up. Everything hurts.* “Dream, help me. My knees hurt.”

Dream wasn't looking at him. Dream was looking past him, mouth moving without sound. He dropped his mask on the floor and blew past Tommy without even sparing him a glance. The screaming continued, loud but somehow distant in Tommy’s ears. *Who is screaming?* He clapped his hands over his ears. *It hurts. It hurts my head. I want Wilbur.*

He turned, and his whole world came to a stop.

Wilbur lay face-up in the middle of a patch of blackened sandstone, wings outstretched as though he were mid-flight. His clothes were torn, smouldering at the seams. Phil knelt over him, gripping one of his pale hands in both of his. Jack, the young Eretian, lay a few feet away with Foolish’s trident still clutched between his twitching hands. His unblinking eyes stared up at the ceiling, seeing nothing.

He was dead.

“Wilbur?” Tommy’s body moved on its own. “Wilbur?” He forced himself to his feet and dove for his brother’s side. Someone caught him around the waist and lifted him into the air. “Wilbur! Wilbur! ”

“Potions! Now!” His father’s voice cracked. Technoblade barrelled out the doors of the pyramid, kicking off into flight the moment he passed the doorway. He looked scared. Technoblade *never* looked scared.

Tommy dug his stinging fingertips into the arm around his waist and kicked back until he was unceremoniously dropped. “Wilbur!” He cried. He practically collapsed at Wilbur’s side and pressed himself into one of his outstretched wings. Feathers came off in his hands, against his face, sloughing off in great big patches. “Stop doing that!” Tommy grasped at Wilbur’s arm. He was trembling. “Wilbur! Stop!”

“Stop yelling at him, Tommy,” Said Phil through gritted teeth. “Don’t frighten him.”

Wilbur’s spacey eyes moved to Tommy. He opened his mouth to speak but was unable to make a

sound over his quick, erratic breathing. When he lifted his other hand to Tommy's cheek and tried futilely to wipe some of the blood from his skin, Tommy noticed a large, blistering burn on his palm. "Wilbur," he whimpered. "Wilbur, say something. Say something, please."

Wilbur made a strangled moaning sound. Tommy wanted to slap him. "Say something! Say something, please!"

Someone came running back into the temple. It wasn't Technoblade, but rather the pink-haired Eretian lady, holding two blades in her hands. Her eyes fell on her friend's motionless corpse and widened in horror. "*Jack!*"

She ran for him, collapsed over him, chest heaving as she sobbed. Tommy felt his heart climb up into his throat and cut off his air. "Wilbur." He buried his hands in Wilbur's coat and shook him with all his might. "We need to get up. We need to get out of here. We need to get you home."

Wilbur did not move. His eyes had closed. "Wilbur!" Tommy's voice rose to a shriek. "Wilbur, get up! We have to go!"

"You're just in shock," Phil whispered, bent low over Wilbur's ear. "Stay with us, mate. It'll pass. You just need to stay conscious."

Every muscle in Wilbur's body seemed to go taut all at once, pulling his limbs into odd positions. A low moan escaped him, broken only by the spasming of his chest as tremors shook his body over, and over, and over. "What the fuck is happening?" Tommy felt hands descend over his eyes and block his view. He scrabbled for Wilbur blindly, never able to touch him. The low moan continued, crawling into his ears like bugs.

The totems. He stood abruptly, swaying on his feet, and tore the hands away from his eyes. Something glimmered within the folds of the pink-haired lady's belt. *I can save him. I can help him.* His wings opened. *It's going to be okay.*

He bowled into the pink-haired lady head-first, knocking them both onto their backs. In her shock, she only stared as Tommy ripped one of the totems from her belt, letting her blades fall from her limp hands. "Dad!" Tommy screamed, half-jumping, half-flying the rest of the way back to Wilbur's side. "This can help! This can save him!"

Dream was in his spot, holding the back of Wilbur's head in one of his callused hands. He had his other hand fisted atop Wilbur's chest, running his knuckles up and down his sternum. "Come on, Wilbur!" He screamed. He sounded like a general of an army. "Come on! Breathe!"

Breathe. Tommy's fingers loosened on the totem. *He's not breathing. He's not breathing anymore.*

"Wilbur?" He fell to his knees between Wilbur's legs and pushed his way between Dream and Phil to place the totem on his sternum. "Wilby?" He pulled Wilbur's free hand onto his chest and curled his fingers around the totem's body. Wilbur's fingers were too limp to keep hold. "This isn't funny, Wilbur. Hold the fucking totem."

"Tommy—" his father's voice broke. Wilbur's head lolled to the side. Tommy felt his stomach drop. "Tommy, please—"

"Shut up!" Tommy ripped Wilbur's other hand from his father's grip and pushed them both onto the totem. "Hold it! It's going to save you! *Hold it!*"

The totem slid from Wilbur's chest and clattered to the floor at Dream's knees. "God damn it!" Tommy bashed his fists down onto Wilbur's stomach and screamed until the air in his lungs was

gone. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you so much!"

Phil let out a sob. "Tommy, please —"

"Shut up!" Tommy grabbed the collar of Wilbur's tunic. His skin was ice cold beneath the fabric. "Get up. Get the fuck up, Wilbur. Get the fuck up or I'll never fucking forgive you."

His threats went unheard, and his brother remained still. Tommy felt the world shift beneath his feet. "Wilbur?" He whispered, defeated. He pressed his face into the crook of Wilbur's shoulder, right where it always went when Wilbur would hold him. "Wilbur, please." It felt so unfamiliar with his skin so cold. "Don't do this to me. Don't leave me here alone."

Wilbur did not answer.

He felt the rush of his father's robes move against his leg as Phil stood. "Dad," came Technoblade's voice. "I couldn't find some of our horses—"

His voice died abruptly. Tommy closed his eyes. Wilbur still smelt like Wilbur. *If I focus hard enough, I can pretend you're still here.* He flinched when Techno's warm hand came to rest on his back. *I can pretend you're just carrying me back inside from a snowstorm. I can pretend—*

I can pretend—

The tears came cold and bitter and grating, stinging against his cuts. Tommy couldn't have stopped them if he tried.

"The god's awake," came Dream's shaky murmur. Tommy couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. "Maybe he's got horses of his—" he stopped. "Phil? Uh, Phil, I—"

Tommy's father was gone with the *fwoosh* of opening wings and a great bellow of rage. "Phil!" Dream screamed. He got up and ran from Wilbur's side, disappearing into the darkness of sounds and smells beyond. "Phil, stop!"

There came a loud *thud* of a blade meeting a target. "Ow!" Foolish cried. The second sound was sharper, as though a blade had been dragged down the pyramid's sandstone walls. "Stop! Please, stop!"

Foolish. Tommy yanked himself from the final comforts of Wilbur's essence and forced himself to stand. Another *thud* rattled the walls. "Tommy." Techno appeared before him, arms outstretched to block whatever was behind him. "Come here, please."

Thud. Tommy ducked beneath his arm. His father had Foolish pressed up against the wall, trapped between the two corners. "Foolish!" He said. His father drew back his sword, baring his teeth in frenzied effort. "Watch out!"

With a grunt, Phil buried his sword into Foolish's stomach.

"NO!" Tommy's feet moved before his brain did and he found himself yanking his father back by the robes, pulling him to the floor until his sword fell from his hands. Foolish pressed his hands to the wound spilling gold onto the sandstone and winced, screwing his eyes shut. Foolish Jr. began to scream, hidden in some unseen nook or cranny. Tommy reached for Foolish and felt him catch his face in both hands. "Foolish!" Was all he could say. *Not you too. Please, not you too.*

"Little man," Foolish wheezed. "That your dad?"

Tommy nodded. Foolish mustered a brave but wavering smile and rubbed his cheek with his thumb. “You’re safe with them now. You don’t need me.”

“No! Not you too!” Tommy grasped at his filthy robes. “You can’t leave me!”

“I’ll be back. Someday.” Foolish moved past him on trembling legs and yanked his trident from Jack’s hands. Nikki remained on her knees at his side, staring up at them with glassy eyes. “I’ll find you again, I pinky promise. I just need to—“ he motioned to his wound and chuckled— “Rest for a bit. See you around, little man. I’m proud of you.”

Still holding his wound with one hand, Foolish raised the trident above his head and brought it down hard into the pools of golden ichor between his feet. Light exploded from nowhere in a dazzling blaze of white and gold, consuming everything in white-hot heat. When Tommy managed to open his eyes again, Foolish was gone. “Foolish?” He whirled around until his head hurt. “Foolish! Foolish, wait!”

The pyramid only groaned in response, nothing more than an empty cadaver. Even Foolish Jr.’s terrified song had stopped. Tommy fell to his knees, threading his hands through his hair. *Not now. Not this.* He opened his mouth and a scream poured forth. *I can’t do this anymore.*

“Portal, now. Everyone.” Phil’s voice quavered. “Let’s get out of this godforsaken place.”

“I’m not leaving!” Tommy cried. He pressed his stinging forehead into the floor and curled into his wings until he could see nothing but darkness. “I need to wait for Foolish!”

“Don’t make this difficult!” His father replied tearfully. “We need to get Wilbur home.”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up!”

“Dream,” Techno cut in. “You take Tommy. I’ve got Wilbur.”

Dream made a quiet noise of agreement. Tommy gritted his teeth. “And what about the horses?” Said George quietly.

“I only could find one,” Techno replied. “The others either ran off, were taken, or escaped back into the nether. Didn’t have much time to look, though.”

“You and Phil go together and get Wilbur settled on the horse we have. Worst comes to worst, we find more horses on the way back,” Dream said. “George and I will stay here with Tommy until he’s ready to go.”

It took a moment for Techno to answer. “Are you sure?”

“I think it’s best,” George added. “Tommy doesn’t look like he’ll move anytime soon.”

Tommy cracked his eyes open. The pink-haired lady was struggling to her feet, Jack slumped across her shoulders. Sliding her blades into her belt with the one remaining totem, she broke into a laboured run and darted out the front doors, glaring at them hatefully as she went. Dream spat on the floor. “Good riddance.”

“Well, now we’re certainly going first. I don’t want those assholes fucking with us on our way home,” said Techno, moving back to Wilbur’s side. “Come on, Dad. Let’s get out of here.”

He bent down and scooped Wilbur up into his arms. “It’s time to go home, Will,” he murmured, pressing his cheek to Wilbur’s. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Tommy's throat went tight and he closed his eyes again. *You're a liar.* Nothing would ever be right again. Not without Wilbur. *You're a liar and you know it.*

He stayed on the floor long enough to fall into a half-doze, long enough for his father and Techno to have disappeared when George finally shook him awake. "Come on, Tommy," he said, his lips pressing together to form a gentle smile. "Let's get on our way home."

"No." Tommy's body felt so heavy. "There's rain. Foolish doesn't like to travel in the rain."

"It's not raining anymore, don't worry. Your dad and Technoblade have already gone ahead back into the nether. They'll stay about half an hour ahead to... give you some space." His hand patted Tommy's shoulder. "And good news! Dream found another one of our horses. It's the dark brown one."

"Carl," Tommy murmured. "It was Wilbur's."

George nodded uncomfortably, his smile growing thin. "I'm sure he'd be happy for us to take Carl home safely."

Tommy sat up, pressing his face into his knees. "I don't want to go home, George," he whimpered. "I can't. I want to stay here with Foolish."

"Your dad needs you home now more than ever." George went to pull Tommy up by the arm, but he flinched away. "You need to be with your family."

"They don't need me to heal. They'll do better without me."

"Your dad was beside himself the entire way here. He was so desperate to find you alive that he'd have slaughtered armies of Eretians to get to you."

Tommy looked up at George bitterly. "And he'd trade me for Wilbur if he got the chance."

"That's not true. I know it isn't." George sat back on his heels and opened his arms. "Come here."

All at once, the terror and the grief and the desperation to hear his brother's voice just one more time hit him, bowling him over like a wave to an unsuspecting fisherman. He flew into George's arms and held onto him for dear life, wailing out his sorrow until he was wheezing and gasping for air that wouldn't come. *Is this how Tubbo felt?* His face began to ache with the movement. *Is this how George felt? Is this what it'll always be like now that he's gone?*

He let George pick him up, let him carry him from the tomb-like temple and out into the open air. The rain had stopped, leaving behind a featureless grey sky and a slight breeze that seemed to cut through his damp, ragged clothing like a hot knife through butter. "Dream!" George called. "I've got Tommy. Let's go."

"Portal!" Dream called back.

"We'll be on our way home soon," George murmured into Tommy's ear. "I promise things will get better."

Tommy didn't believe it, but he nodded anyway. His chest felt like it had been filled with straw, like one of his fighting dummies back home. Someone could punch and punch away at him for hours and he wouldn't feel anything. *Anything is better than the pain,* he thought, feeling the slumbering beast twist in his stomach. George's footsteps rocked him side to side, pulling him down into nothingness. *I can handle feeling nothing.*

George passed him to Dream, who then hefted him up onto Carl's back. Tommy buried his face in the horse's damp mane and breathed in, searching for signs of Wilbur amongst the smells of animal fur and hay. He couldn't find any. Somehow, that both devastated and relieved him.

"I'll go first, just to make sure things are safe," Dream said. He'd put his cracked mask back on. "You two will ride in thirty seconds or so later. If something's off, I'll come right back through. Sound good?"

"Got it. I'll take care of the steering. Tommy can rest." George lifted his leg. "Help me up, please."

Dream pushed him up behind Tommy and handed him the reins. Then he unsheathed his axe, the only remaining one in his double holster on his back, and jumped through the portal without another word. Left in silence, Tommy closed his eyes with a soft groan and wiped at the layer of blood crusting over his chin. "When can I eat next?" He asked quietly. "I haven't had anything since—"

A flash of green burst through the portal and suddenly Carl was staggering backwards, head tipped sideways. Someone was pulling on his reins. "Go! Go!" Came Dream's roar. "Get away!"

An ear-piercing explosion punched them all back. Carl reared, screaming, and nearly threw the both of them off before George caught the reins and pulled him to a halt. Dream had been thrown to the ground and lay there motionlessly, axe stuck in the sand a foot or so away. For a chilling moment, Tommy thought he was dead. Then he rose, cursing in such filthy terms it made Tommy want to cover his ears, and the terror slunk away and settled back in the pit of his stomach. *He's fine. He's okay. He's alive.*

"That slimy little —" Dream punched at nothing— "Fucking *bitch* ! Next time I see her, she's getting a god damn axe through her chest!"

Tommy's eyes widened as the dust settled. The portal was broken. Aether above, the fucking portal was *broken* . Part of the upper left corner had come away, falling into the sand in uneven black chunks. The purple haze was gone, any remaining particles fluttering away into nothing like embers. Tommy jabbed a finger at it, words frozen on his tongue, and felt George gasp against his back. "The portal!"

"They fucking rigged it," Dream spat. "Both of those Eretians just sitting there, waiting for me. The second they saw me come through, the fuse was lit. If I hadn't come right back through, I'd be red mist all over that damn fucking delta." He grabbed his axe and swung it into the ground, spraying sand. "I should have sunk my axe into that asshole's back when she was sat there crying over her fucking idiot friend."

"Dream," George said through gritted teeth. His hands tightened on Tommy's shoulders. "There's no need for that kind of violence. We need to fix the portal."

"We can't!" Dream cried. "Do you know how many tools it takes to forge obsidian into blocks like that? We don't even have a lava source!"

"What about Phil and Technoblade? Won't they realize we're gone?"

"Yeah, but they won't be able to do anything. If the portal's fucked out here, it's certainly fucked in there." Dream tipped his mask up onto his forehead and scrubbed at his eyes. "Fuck. *Fuck* . Things could not get any worse."

“Let’s not fall into despair immediately,” said George. “We have some supplies. All we need to do is make it though the Badlands portal, and we’re back on our way.”

“That’s three whole days away at the best. I don’t even know how much food we’ve got left.” Dream walked to the packs hanging off Carl’s flanks and rustled through them. His frown momentarily lifted as he pulled a palm-sized compass from one of the side pockets. “Well, there’s at least a silver lining. Glad I don’t have to read stars or some shit to figure out what direction to go in.”

“That’s mine!” Tommy twisted so hard his ribs ached and thrust his hands out. “Give that to me!”

Dream started, staring with wide eyes, and allowed Tommy to practically rip it from his hands. *It smells like Wilbur. This is Wilbur’s compass.* Tommy bent back over Carl’s mane, holding the cold metal circle against his chest, and bared his teeth to keep from screaming. The thought of Wilbur squeezed his lungs in an iron grip. *Wilbur’s gone. Wilbur’s dead. He’s gone and he’s never coming back and I can never talk to him again and nothing will ever be alright again and —*

He turned his head. Dream was staring at him with pursed lips. “I need that,” he said.

“Dream!” George chastised. “Let him have a moment.”

“I just need it for a second! We need to get out of here!” He reached out. “Just give it to me for half a second and I’ll give it back.”

A burst of aggression filled Tommy’s veins. “No! It’s mine!”

“I just need it for a second!” Dream scowled. “Give it to me!”

“No!” Screaming felt good on his throat. It hurt just enough to scratch the itch within him that screamed of *Wilbur, Wilbur, Wilbur*. “It’s mine!”

“Dream!” George said angrily. “Stop it.”

“Then you figure out which way is North!” Dream raised his hands in defeat and turned away, yanking his axe from the sand. “Then you can have it all day fucking long. Gods Almighty.”

George let out a growl, but his hands were soft as he pulled Tommy back into a sitting position and pried the compass from his fingers. “I just need to see where North is,” he said, turning it in his hands until it was upright. “Directly ahead!” He yelled to Dream, who’d moved to the pyramid’s side and was kicking around a slice of broken obsidian. “Into the forest!”

Dream jogged back, pulling his mask back over his frown. “There. That was easy enough. Let’s get a head start on this impromptu trip and get to the Badlands before I lose my mind.”

“I’ll keep my eyes out for anything out of the ordinary.” George took the reins from Dream’s hand and kicked Carl into a brisk walk. His gait felt like Wilbur. The saddle felt like Wilbur. *Everything* felt like Wilbur.

Tommy closed his eyes. *Maybe this is all just a bad dream. It feels like one.* Distant thunder rumbled away, but there came no rain. *I want Wilbur. I want him there when I wake up.*

Carl snorted, then sighed, his footsteps soft and even.

Tommy wondered if Phil and Techno had realized they weren’t coming yet.

Chapter End Notes

please don't stop reading i need the clout guys please

God it's hard to believe that dnf are the LEAST disappointing adults in Tommy's life right now???that's just sad sjskfjd
seriously though this kid. man. oof. i promise there will be some comfort to this hurt in act 3. and the return of dnf! they've taken a wee backburner with the Tommy stuff but I promise I haven't forgotten about their shenanigans ;p

hopefully being stuck with a traumatized child in the middle of a forest won't get in the way of romantic tension :)

edit: YALL I PROMISE IT GETS BETTER IM NOT THAT MEAN! And Foolish isn't dead ;)

-Ophelia

Return Flight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Knock knock.”

Ranboo cracked open an eye. The sun was high in the sky outside, blazing gold down through the curtains. “Hello?”

“It’s Sapnap, bringing food. Can I come in?”

Ranboo looked down at Tubbo beside him, curled face-first into a pillow, and sighed. “Yeah,” he said. “Come in.”

The door creaked open and Sapnap stepped in, holding a tray on his shoulder. “Hey stinkers,” he said with a light smile. “How are you two holding up?”

Horribly, just like you. Ranboo shrugged. “Fine. Tubbo’s been sleeping well.”

It was the truth, technically, but based on the way Sapnap’s face fell, that hadn’t been the answer he’d been looking for. He lifted his eyes to the dresser at the far end of the room, where their half-eaten breakfast lay staling beneath crumpled napkins, and deflated. “Did you guys eat any of that?”

“I did!” Ranboo said. “Tubbo wasn’t too hungry.”

Tubbo hadn’t been hungry for over twenty-four hours, since Phil and Techno had flown through the portal without their horses, carrying a stiff body wrapped in a sleeping bag.

Twenty-four hours since they’d returned without George. Without Dream.

Without Tommy.

“Come on, guys.” Sapnap laid the tray down on the bed beside Ranboo’s knee. “You have to be eating. Technoblade left me in charge of you two.”

“How is Techno?” Ranboo interrupted. He’d barely seen the prince since he’d come back. After forcing a 3-day journey into a 20-hour mad flight back, he’d been able to do little more upon returning than lay his brother’s body down onto the ground beside the portal and collapse beside it, pale and trembling. He’d been in the infirmary since, avoiding visitors.

“He’s alive,” was all that Sapnap offered in reply. “He won’t talk to me except to give me orders about you two, but he’s still talking. That’s more than we can say for King Phil.”

“Did he say anything about the mission? About Tommy?”

“Tommy’s not alone out there, apparently. Dream and King George got stuck there with him. The Eretians blew up the portal before they got through.” Sapnap sat on the bed and leaned on one of the posters as if overcome by a pounding headache. “Techno’s already sent out people to go back to the temple and check it, just to make sure. We’ll know within a few days.”

A deep ache settled in Ranboo’s stomach. He let himself slide down a little, pressing his shoulder into Tubbo’s back. He could tell he was listening. “So it was the Eretians.”

“Seems so. Maybe we’ll get more details when the shock dies down. I’ll force it out of Dream when I see him next.”

“At least Tommy’s not alone. Dream’s more than capable of keeping him safe.”

An empty chuckle rumbled in Sapnap’s throat. “Yeah. If there’s anyone who could do it, it’s Dream. He’ll bring ‘em both home, safe and sound.”

Both their eyes flickered to Tubbo, who remained still, hair falling over his eyes in unbrushed clumps. Ranboo looked at the floor. “Yeah.”

“I’ll leave you two, then. Try to eat a little.” Sapnap put his hand on Tubbo’s ankle. “That means you too, Tubbo. You have to keep your energy up.”

Tubbo, unsurprisingly, offered no reply, and Sapnap left with a wave and a grim smile upon his lips. When his footsteps had faded down the hall, Ranboo shuffled down and pressed his face between Tubbo’s shoulder blades. He was cold. “Let’s get up and eat something,” he mumbled. “Or Sapnap’s going to get mad.”

“My stomach hurts,” Tubbo replied, barely above a whisper. “I don’t want to.”

“You have to. You can’t just starve.” Ranboo poked at Tubbo’s back until he shifted with an annoyed grumble. “Please? Just a little.”

Tubbo sat up, scrubbing at his eyes. “Fine,” he said. “But if it’s roast beef sandwiches and carrots again, I’m going to puke everywhere.”

“No, just jam. That and these dried fruit things.” Ranboo held one up to his nose and sniffed. “They smell healthy.”

“Gross.” Tubbo reached over and stuffed an entire half sandwich into his mouth. “This stuff is going to make me sick.”

“I’d rather you be sick than starving,” Ranboo said, earning him a side-eyed glare. “It’s true! I’d like you to be alive, thank you very much.”

“And I—” Tubbo forced down his mouthful of food— “I’d like for Tommy to be alive. I’d like for Wilbur to be alive. I’d like for my *dad* to be alive. But we can’t always get what we want, can we?”

Ranboo scowled. “Tommy *is* alive. He’s with Dream and George. They’ll take care of him.”

“Yeah. Until some more Eretians attack again, or some other totem god comes and takes him away. Then what? I wait some more?” Tubbo’s face twisted. “I watch Phil and Technoblade and Dream and George leave on their horses and bring someone else back in a body bag?”

A weight settled on Ranboo’s shoulders. “Tubbo, I…” he trailed off, unable to figure out what to say next. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“*Nobody* knows what the fuck to do,” Tubbo hissed. He crushed his sandwich between his fingers until red jam began dribbling through his fingers. “This is all so stupid. I hate it.”

He threw the crushed sandwich against the wall and let it splatter. Ranboo winced. “Come on, man. That’ll be an ass to get out of the carpet.”

“Then leave it! I don’t care!” Tubbo kicked himself off the bed and walked to the window, rubbing

at his uneven horns. “You know what I’d like to do, Ranboo?”

I don’t like this. “What?” Ranboo said.

“When I become king of Manburg, whenever that is, I’d like to make big — no, *massive* — bombs. Something that could blow an entire kingdom to dust.” Tubbo inhaled deeply. “Then if anyone came near me, anyone tried to kill someone I love — *boom*. Gone.”

Ranboo bit down on his bottom lip. “You’d kill so many innocent people!”

“I don’t care! Innocent people die all the time!” Tubbo cried. “If I had those, nobody would even dare touch me or my kingdom! Those Eretians wouldn’t come within miles!”

“Come eat more. You’re scaring me.” Ranboo teleported to Tubbo’s side and put his hands on his shoulders. Tubbo didn’t flinch. His dark eyes stared outwards into the blustery outdoors, fixed on some faraway point over the horizon. *Please be safe, Tommy. He doesn’t listen to me like he listens to you.* “Please?”

“I’m tired of feeling like this.” Tubbo’s mouth tightened into a bitter scowl. “I feel so shit all the time. Nothing ever gets better. I have a stomach ache every day.”

“It will, I promise,” Ranboo said, pulling on him gently. “We just need to get through this.”

“What is *this* ? When’s it going to end? When the Eretians kill George? Or Phil? Or Tommy? They’re never going to stop this, Ranboo. Ever. They’ll keep picking us off one by one.”

“We can find peace. I know we can.”

“You’re not a prince. You don’t know anything about royal life.”

That stung. Ranboo gritted his jaw, releasing Tubbo’s shoulders. “I work with Technoblade. I know enough of it to be able to comfort you.”

“Fucking—” Tubbo spun on his heel and shouldered past Ranboo with a snarl. “You can’t comfort me. Not until Tommy comes back and keeps his stupid ass out of trouble for five minutes.”

“Hey!” Ranboo cried. “Where is all this aggression coming from? You can’t be mad at him for being kidnapped by Eretians!”

“I *can*, actually!” Tubbo whirled back around, spit flying from his mouth. “I can because I want to! If he’d have just been with us instead of probably sulking about because he’s a jealous idiot, he wouldn’t have been kidnapped at all!”

Ranboo stopped. “Tommy’s jealous? Of who?”

“Of you. Of me. Of us,” Tubbo replied bitterly. “He wants me all to himself and he wants you all to himself because he’s a selfish asshole. I don’t care. You’re coming back with me to Manburg whether he likes it or not.”

He’s scaring me. “You can’t make that decision for me,” Ranboo said. “I’m not going to choose between either of you. Tommy still needs me to help him write, and you—”

“Tommy can learn to write himself! He can learn from his dad, his brother—” Tubbo let loose a sob— “Or George, or Sapnap, or even Dream! I don’t care! He can’t keep you too just because he’s too lazy and stupid to learn to write himself!”

The poison in his words hung in the air like a thick, noxious gas. Ranboo felt sick to his stomach. With a frustrated groan, Tubbo turned again and flung the door open. “Don’t come looking for me!” He said through his tears. “I want to be alone!”

Before Ranboo had the chance to reply, Tubbo stomped out and slammed the door shut behind him with a rattling crash. He stood there for a moment, wanting to cry and scream and go back to sleep all at once. *He can’t turn on Tommy like that. They’re best friends.* A headache bloomed in his temples. Ranboo looked back at Tubbo’s bed, the food laying forgotten on it, and sighed. *I’ll give him some time alone and solve it later. I don’t have the energy to go and follow him.*

The sandwiches tasted like glue, but he ate them anyway. At least Sapnap would be happy.

~

Dream had done worst treks through the forest before. He’d had less supplies, more injuries, more mouths to feed and more lives to keep safe. Aether almighty, at least he didn’t have a bleeding George pressed up against him, half-dead against his chest, or a missing prince in his arms minutes away from succumbing to hypothermia. Things had, obviously, been much worse before, and Dream had always handled it with the utmost skill and maturity.

Tommy always had a special way of making Dream’s good traits go flying out the window.

“You should rest.”

George shook his head. “No. I’m fine just like this.”

“You’ve been walking all day and you’re not used to it,” Dream said. “You’re not a knight, George.”

“And I’m not an infant, either. Walking is, in fact, part of my daily kingly routine,” George replied smoothly. “If my poor little ankles get too wobbly, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

As if to mock him, George hopped up onto a nearby fallen log, hopping back and forth over the mossy branches. *Idiot*, Dream thought, but the warmth that bloomed in his chest wasn’t entirely unwelcome. *I miss you.*

In the presence of Tommy, whatever scraps of bashful attention they passed between each other had become practically non-existent. Tommy didn’t sleep the night before, which meant Dream didn’t sleep either. Instead, he spent the night keeping their fire alive, watching Tommy pace back and forth through the firelight as he ripped feathers from his wings. George was the only one who slept, his head and hands just out of reach of Dream’s wandering fingers. *Friends*, he told his mind over and over. *Just friends.*

You’re an idiot, it screamed back. *And you know it.*

“Is Tommy asleep?” Dream asked, craning his head back to look. He was curled atop Carl’s back, wings stretched up over his head like a sunblock. “Tommy? Are you asleep?”

“Let him rest,” George said. “You told me he didn’t sleep last night.”

“I’m trying to keep him at least somewhat diurnal, okay? The last thing we need is to have a groggy Tommy if something goes wrong out here. Sleeping is for nights only.” Dream cocked a finger back at him. “Go wake him up.”

“You do it, if that’s the hill you want to die on.” George grabbed ahold of the reins and tugged on

them. "I'll lead Carl."

Dream scowled, but allowed George to pull the reins from his fingers nonetheless. "Fine," he mumbled, and George crinkled his nose bridge in a playful smile. "But know that you'll be left alone with him if he kills me."

"I'll manage." George flicked him away. "Go on. Wake him up."

"Right on it, your Highness."

He moved to Carl's side and laid a hand on Tommy's ankle. The child stirred, but only slightly. His face was still unseen, buried in his arms. Wilbur's compass glimmered in one of his hands. "Up, now," Dream said gently. "No sleeping during the day."

"Go away." Tommy kicked his hand away. "I'm tired."

"You should have slept last night, then," Dream replied with a frown. "You know I'll keep you safe."

"I don't like the dark. Not out here."

"I'll keep a fire going."

"That attracts monsters."

"We have some leftover potions to keep us safe. No monsters for us."

"Still. It scares me."

Dream sighed. "Why don't you come walk with me for a while? You can rest those wings of yours."

He reached out and touched one of the bald spots with the pad of his finger. Tommy mumbled something beneath his breath, pulling at strands of his hair. "Come on," Dream pressed. "I'll tell you some fun stories."

Tommy raised his eyes over his arm. The scab over his eyebrow was a sickening purple. "About what?"

"Being a knight! I didn't always spend my time loitering about in people's castles. I used to lead the whole team back home." Dream raised his hands. "Come on. I'll help you down."

Tommy scowled, but allowed Dream to pull him off Carl's back and stand him on the ground. He was pale, sweaty, obviously more ill at ease than George and Dream himself were. His facial wounds pulled at his skin with every movement of his eyebrows or mouth. He kept Wilbur's compass clutched between his hands, checking it every so often. "We're still going North?" Dream asked.

Tommy nodded silently, and Dream glanced at George's back up ahead. *Gods, I'm shit with kids. You were always better at handling him than me.*

Dream looked down. Tommy's dark-ringed eyes stared ahead, focused somewhere deep into the forest, but Dream could tell he was listening. "Do you want a story?"

"I want to go back to sleep," he said. "I have a headache."

“That’s what you get for sleeping during the day,” Dream replied, fighting the urge to give him a pat on the shoulder. For all he knew, the child would shatter beneath his fingers like glass. “Want to hear about how Sapnap and I scared off a ravager herd with a torch?”

“Why’s your face all—“ Tommy slashed in front of his face with a finger. “Is that from a ravager?”

“I— what?” Dream nearly froze in his tracks.

“Your face,” Tommy repeated, louder. A challenge. A poke to a bear’s flank. “Is that from a ravager? Did it fuck up your face?”

“When did you see my face?”

“You took your mask off with Wilbur, and I saw some of it when we saved Tubbo.” Tommy turned the compass in his hands, smirking. “I was just curious. No need to get crazy about it.”

I’d have had your feathery ass on a plate for asking me that on any other day. Dream sighed. *But you’ve somehow forced my hand into taking the high road.*

Tommy’s eyes widened as Dream dropped his mask into his hands. “Huh?” He looked up and gaped. “Your mask!”

“Have it for a little while. I need to breathe some fresh air.” Dream inhaled through his nose and forced his beating heart to calm. “Put it on. It’s cool.”

George turned at that, eyebrow raised. Tommy looked at him unsurely. “You’re not going to be mad at me?”

“Course not. I gave you permission.” Dream poked the mask with a finger. *Ha. Take that, you little instigator.* “Go on. Try it.”

Tommy slipped it on, pulling the straps tighter to make it stay, and something in Dream’s chest jumped. *Whoa! No! No! No!* One half of him screamed. *Nobody wears my mask!*

He looks just like you, the other half whispered. *But even you weren’t that young when you put it on.*

“Creepy,” Dream said with a laugh. “I’d shit my pants if you came near me.”

Tommy whirled around, looking in every direction. “You can see through it!”

“Well, yeah! Did you expect me to be blind?”

“I don’t know.” A tiny giggle escaped Tommy in a huff of breath. “I thought it had eye holes or something. I never looked at it too closely.”

“He needed something more high-tech than eye holes,” George piped in. He met Dream’s eyes and smiled, stripping him bare beneath the warmth of his gaze. *Tommy, please sleep tonight,* Dream internally begged. *So maybe I’ll have a chance to at least talk to him again.*

“I got these scars saving George,” Dream said, chuckling as Tommy whirled around to face him in surprise. “From an assassin.”

“What?” Tommy cried. “When?”

“We were fifteen. The bad guy got at my face with a knife, and the cuts never healed right.

George's dad thought I'd be too recognizable with the scars, so..." Dream motioned to the mask. "Here we are."

"Oh." Tommy looked down at the floor. "Wilbur saved me from an assassin, kind of," He said. "It's like you guys are like brothers too."

Nope. Nope, nope, nope. Nowhere close. Dream grimaced. "Uh, maybe —"

"Brothers?" George scoffed.

"We're more like best friends. Sapnap's like my brother." Dream forced a nervous smile.

"Tubbo is my best friend and is *also* like my brother," Tommy said. Dream could practically hear him rolling his eyes. "They're pretty much the same, you know."

"It's different. George is my king. So, yeah. Not brothers."

Tommy let out a great sigh and turned his eyes to the compass in his hands. His long, tussled hair poked out of the edges of the mask like a lion's mane. "You two are weird."

They walked for the next little while in silence, Tommy remaining at Dream's side with his mask on like some creepy winged spectre of his younger self. The state of his clothes was worrying, to say the least — tattered, ill-fitting, certainly more suited to the hot balminess of the Land of the Undying than the rapidly-increasing frigidity of the forest around them. If it got much colder, they'd be fucked. Any extra clothes they'd packed for him had been stored on Phil's horse.

Tommy sneezed. "I got germs in your mask."

This seems almost normal. "I'll wipe it after," Dream said. "Don't worry about it."

It didn't take long for Wilbur to creep into Dream's mind as they lapsed back into silence, hidden within the melodic tinks of the compass against Tommy's fingernails. *He was George's friend, too.* Dream pursed his lips. George walked ahead of him, any signs of his grief meticulously hidden. *He was Tommy's everything. Now he's just gone.*

The thought of returning back to the Antarctic Empire, into those halls filled with grief and the constant reminder of what they lost, put a deep ache into his stomach. *Then it's back to sitting around. Back to waiting for King Eret to slaughter someone else and wait for us to run to the scent of blood.*

But onwards they marched anyway. For dinner, if not for anything else. George was always picky about where they stopped for meals.

~

"Here?"

George nodded. Dream looked up, crinkling his eyes as he stared up into the setting sun. "It's rather open."

"I don't like having trees all around us when we make fires. The last thing we need is to accidentally set a tree aflame and kill half the animals in this country." George set his hands on his hips, leaning forward to stretch his sore back. As much as he liked to claim top-tier physical fitness in the face of Dream's scrutiny, walking for almost twelve hours straight was a new type of strain on his back and feet. Settling down to sleep would be nice.

Dream quirked a frown. There was a light sunburn across the bridge of his nose, darkening the spatter of freckles. “Tommy won’t like it. I think the open space freaks him out.”

“Being surrounded by dark trees would freak him out too. He’s twelve, Dream, not to mention a prince who’s probably never slept outdoors before. This is all scary for him.”

“He needs to sleep,” Dream pressed. “I won’t sleep unless he does and I already stayed up all night last night with him.”

Tommy stumbled out of the treeline, wiping his hands on his pants. Dream’s mask sat half-belted around his neck like an odd sort of necklace. “I hate pissing in the trees. It’s gross.”

George pursed his lips. “You’re sleeping tonight, Dream. I’ll stay up with him if he’s scared. You take one sleeping bag to yourself and I’ll share the other with him.”

Dream scowled at him, turning to heft their things from Carl’s back. Though they had no proper hay to feed him with, the gentle beast seemed fine with the long field grass and chuffed good-naturedly as Dream rubbed his nose with his free hand. “You need sleep more than I do,” Dream mumbled.

“You’re the leader here. Tommy and I would be screwed if you collapsed from exhaustion.” George beckoned Tommy nearer with his hand. “Help Dream set up the fire. I’ll get the sleeping bags.”

“I’m tired,” Tommy moaned. “I want to go home.”

“That’s what we’re trying to do, bud,” Dream replied, slightly too sharp for George’s liking. “Go get me some little sticks. There’s lots in the treeline.”

Tommy stamped his foot, rousing his half-naked wings uncomfortably. “I don’t want to be here. I want to go home.”

Dream dropped their packs to the ground, making Tommy visibly jolt at the noise. “If we make good distance tomorrow, we could be in the Badlands by midnight. Then we get back into the nether and be home within a couple days.”

“That’s too long .” Tommy bared his teeth. Aggression bristled along his spine like electrical currents. “I want to be home *now*.”

“Tommy,” George said. “You’ll feel better with a meal in you. Find some sticks for us and we’ll handle the rest.”

Tommy’s eyes flicked to Dream, who only glowered and jabbed a finger into the trees. He turned with a groan, kicking dirt onto George’s shoes, and stomped off with his wings outstretched and as fluffed as they could be with so many feathers missing. “Gods,” George sighed. “What a kid.”

“He’s a maniac,” Dream replied with a scoff.

He opened one of the packs, spilling their ration tins onto the ground. George bent down, picking them up before Dream had the chance to. “I thought you’d turned a leaf with him. You gave him your mask.”

“I was overcome with Phil’s fatherly spirit or something,” Dream said. He pulled the tins from George’s hands, brushing their fingers together for a moment. George glanced up, hiding a smile, but Dream had already turned away. “Whatever it is, it’s gone now. How long do you think he’ll

want to keep it, anyway?”

“Let him have it until he doesn’t want it anymore, please.” George sat back on his heels, watching Dream prop up their leftover logs and pull a flint and steel from his pocket. “He needs something to distract him.”

“It’s dangerous for me to be without it. I don’t like it.” Dream looked up and squinted. “Tommy! Got any sticks yet?”

“Don’t rush me!” Came the screamed reply.

Dream only rolled his eyes.

Dinner, surprisingly, passed uneventfully. They ate mostly in silence, Tommy having lapsed back into a grief-induced haze that left him dead-eyed and unable to answer more than simple questions. George wasn’t in much of a mood for conversation, either. *I was eating like this with Wilbur less than two days ago.* Pain spread down his chest, pooling in his gut like a poison. The food tasted like nothing in his mouth. *Now he’s gone. Forever.*

It was dark before he knew it, their only light being that of the dying embers in their fire. At George’s request, Dream (albeit reluctantly) took one of the sleeping bags to himself, leaving George and Tommy to share the other one. Tommy wasn’t all too big, even with his wings, so it was easy for him to slip in beside George and make himself comfortable. “My stomach hurts,” he said weakly, half-asleep against George’s shoulder.

“I know,” was all George could answer. *Mine does too.* “I know.”

When he woke next, the embers in the fire were little more than ash. A waning moon was high in the sky, surrounded by the silvery blush of stars. George looked up at it for a moment, feeling peace despite his exhaustion. *It reminds me of your freckles,* he thought, too tired to push the thought away. It was only when his fingers stretched into empty space beside him that he noticed the distinct lack of a body beside him. “To—” he started, but the sound died in his throat before it had even passed his lips. He squinted into the darkness, letting an odd shape take form beneath the moonlight a foot or so away.

“Dream.” Tommy’s whisper was tight and shaky. He’d been crying. “Dream, wake up.”

He crouched over Dream’s sleeping form, pulling his knees to his chin. “Wake up!” He squeaked, voice cracking. He smacked Dream’s shoulder. “Wake up!”

Dream jolted with a gasp. “What the hell are you doing crouching over me like a wild animal?” Came his irritated grumble. “That’s how you get punched.”

“They’re going to bury Wilbur without me, Dream.” Tommy drew in a shuddering breath. He was trembling. “They’re going to bury him when I’m not there and I’ll never be able to say goodbye.”

Silence. George’s heart twisted. “Come on, kid,” Dream said, but his voice was gentle. “You have to sleep.”

“I’ll never be able to say goodbye!” Tommy whispered, beating his hands on Dream’s chest. “I’ll never see him again!”

He bent forward, sobbing, and one of Dream’s hands came up to pull him close. “Don’t wake George,” he chided softly. “I’ll exile you from this whole group if he wakes up grumpy.”

“I want to go home, Dream. I want Wilbur.”

“I can’t give you Wilbur, but I will get you home. I promise.”

“It should have been me who died. Wilbur didn’t deserve that.”

The silence that followed was biting and stark. Tommy buried his face in his hands. “Don’t say that,” Dream said, reaching up to flick the back of Tommy’s hand. “It was a big accident. Nobody should have died at all.”

“He was stupid.” Tommy’s voice dropped to a low groan. “He tried to save me and was stupid and now he’s dead.”

“That’s not your fault.” Dream lifted the side of the sleeping bag. “In, now. Before your feathery ass catches a cold.”

Tommy did as he was told, clambering over Dream’s chest to wiggle himself into the blankets. Just as his head settled in the nook beneath Dream’s chin, Tommy spoke again. “I want to see Tubbo. Ranboo, too.”

“They’re at home, probably just as excited to see you as you are them.” Dream yawned. “I’ll try my best to have us in the Badlands by tomorrow night, okay? I promise.”

“Okay,” Tommy echoed, sniffing. “And I’m sorry for calling your face ugly. It kind of is, but I shouldn’t have said it out loud.”

George bit his tongue to keep from laughing. Dream scoffed. “I’ll forgive you if you keep the snark to a minimum from now on, especially around King George. Got it?”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Dream only grunted, and nothing more was said. George lay awake for several minutes and watched the odd pair as they slept, overcome with a strange warmth that sat deep in his chest. *Badlands, here we come.* He closed his eyes, lulled into peacefulness by the sounds of Dream and Tommy’s tandem breathing.

He liked to think the waning moon was smiling down on them.

Chapter End Notes

Dream: yeah fuck this stinky little kid I hate him he brings out the worst of me
Also Dream: gives the kid his mask instead of fighting with him, comforts him when he’s upset, lets him sleep in the same sleeping bag as him even after he calls him ugly

Forgive me for this update taking so long!! Things have been busy in Miss Ophie’s life. I got my first vaccine (woot!) and have been juggling a summer class for my uni degree! Here is a relatively relaxing chapter to kick off act 3. I thought you guys would appreciate some beeduo >:)

Hopefully the next update won’t take so long. This act is the most difficult to write, so I have to plan lots of things each chapter in order to make the story make sense. I also don’t go back and edit chapters after I post them, so if I don’t plan something enough

to make sense, I scrap the idea! Thank you for all your amazing comments. They really motivate me to keep going ♥

also if I could dedicate this entire story to Qar (search them up their stories are so fucking good) I would because I do not know what I'd do without the help of their amazing MCYT writing discord, The Writers Block! It's also their bday on the sixth so Qar if you see this I genuinely appreciate you and the amazing work you put into that server sm /gen

Stay cheasin

-Ophelia

The Badlands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy never dreamed of Wilbur. Ever.

But that night, he did.

“I miss you.”

“I’m right here,” Wilbur said, taking one of Tommy’s pawns. “Don’t miss me.”

“You died. I watched you die.” Tommy’s chest ached. “You’re gone.”

“We’re home. I came back to life. Somehow.”

Tommy wanted to reach for him, to pull himself into Wilbur’s arms and stay there for hours. But, somehow, Wilbur seemed so distant. “When did that happen?”

“Don’t know.”

Tommy pressed his head into his pillows. There was a blizzard around them, whipping his bed curtains side to side. “I want to be home. I don’t want to be outside anymore.”

He buried himself into his blankets and listened to Tubbo and Ranboo play chess without him. Wilbur. Wilbur was somehow there and not there, close but far away. Wilbur, Wilbur, Wilbur. He wanted. He wanted so badly that it filled his chest and pulled on every one of his atoms. I just need a hug and a good sleep and then I’ll be out of your hair, I promise. I’ll stop kicking you in my sleep. I don’t do it on purpose. His body felt so heavy. His eyes would no longer open. Wilbur was just out of reach.

He opened his eyes. His body was no lighter.

“Mph.” Tommy shuffled onto his side, pressing his palms into his eyes. The big scabs on his face itched. *Don’t cry. Don’t cry.* The morning air was crisp around his ears, raising goosebumps along the back of his neck and shoulders. The sun had risen, but only just, so the clearing and the forest were dim with golden light. Prettier than any sight Tommy saw at home, sure, but he couldn’t bring himself to enjoy it.

Dream lay behind him on his back, one arm tucked behind his head. He’d put his cracked mask on at some point during the night, but based on his slow, even breathing, he looked to still be asleep. His other arm was outstretched sideways, just above Tommy’s head. Tommy scooted up and laid his aching head on Dream’s bicep. He had a lot of muscle. *My neck hurts.*

It was then that Tommy noticed Dream’s other hand, stretched out of the sleeping bag and into the dirt. It was closed, claspings several of George’s fingers between his own. George himself lay but feet away, slightly curled in on himself with his head resting on his other arm. Dead to the world, they both were, but still somehow holding hands.

Tommy sniffed at the air. It smelt of dew. *They’re weird,* he thought, and that was the end of that.

His thoughts wandered throughout the morning, growing foggy as the finite comfort of his dreams

wore off. He snapped at George over breakfast and scratched his cheek wound into a bloody mess again, but didn't have much energy to cause many more problems than that. *Good*, he thought, picking at the blood beneath his nails. *Whatever controls the hurricane.*

Though he'd slept well the night before, exhaustion hung from his shoulders like a weighted cape. He didn't feel hungry, didn't feel thirsty, even as the sun arced high above his head and wetted his forehead with sweat. Thinking of Wilbur at all made his stomach hurt, but trying to not think about him only made Tommy think of him more. The cycle continued like that for hours, seemingly unending.

"We're getting close," Dream declared, squinting into the afternoon sun. "Look at the ground."

Tommy looked down. The grass and trees had grown more scarce over the hours, leaving behind nothing but reddish dirt and the occasional pinecone on the ground. "It's just dirt."

"There's clay in that dirt. That means we're close." Dream straightened his shoulders. "Thank the gods."

"Hopefully there are some Antarctic Empire guards already there waiting for us. Phil and Techno have to know that that's where we'd go next," George said. "I also hope they have showers."

"They have showers," Dream scoffed. "This isn't a pilgrim town. It's nice. Lots of horses, I've heard."

"They have the best horses. That's where Dad buys all of ours for the knights." Tommy petted Carl's flank. "Maybe his brothers are there."

Dream nodded. "Oh, I bet."

A biting breeze blew by them and their conversation fizzed away like a droplet of water on a hot pan. Time passed, both unbearably slow and faster than the blink of an eye. Tommy eventually found himself atop Carl's back, dangling his shaking legs over the horse's side. Dream and George walked ahead, having drifted to each other's sides, heads leaned ever so slightly towards one another as they bickered in hushed whispers. About what, Tommy wasn't sure. *Hard to believe they're best friends now. Tubbo said they hated each other.*

He squeezed his compass between his hands and grief hit him in a sudden wave, cutting his breath short. *Wilbur, Wilbur, Wilbur. I hope you aren't looking down on me right now.* He closed his eyes. *I don't want you to feel bad about me anymore.*

A gentle hand closed over his own and Tommy jumped. *Wilbur!* His brain offered excitedly, but it was only George who walked beside him when he opened his eyes. "Oh," he mumbled. "Hi."

"Hey." George gave him a small smile and squeezed his hand. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I'm awake." Tommy closed his eyes again. He didn't want to look at George. He didn't want to look at anyone. "What do you want?"

"Just seeing if you're alright," George said. "Dream's worried about you. As am I."

If he had had more energy, he might have just thrown himself into George's arms right there and then, never to let go. But in that moment, he barely had the strength to speak at all. "I just miss Wilbur."

George went silent for a moment, then let out a sigh so quiet it was hardly more than a breath. "I

do too,” he said quietly, closing his fingers around Tommy’s. “If you need anything when we get home, you can come to me and Dream. We’ll help you.”

“Thank you.” Tommy pulled George’s hand to his face and pressed it to his cheek. “I’m sorry if I’m bad.”

“We’re all stressed right now. Try your best to stay calm and we will too.” George bumped his cheek with his knuckle and chuckled lightly. “We’ll all be okay. I promise.”

I don’t believe you, but that makes me feel safe anyway. “Okay,” Tommy murmured. “I think I’m going to take a nap. You put the idea into my brain and now I’m all sleepy and shit.”

“Don’t tell Dream,” George replied with a soft smile. “I’ll leave you be.”

Then he walked away, taking with him the warmth of his hands and Tommy’s momentary peace. His footsteps became lost in the melodic thumping of Carl’s hooves and faded into the forest noise, gentle in Tommy’s ears.

Sleep came quick and easy, for that Tommy was glad. He was sure George was too.

~

“I saw you, last night. Helping Tommy.”

Dream’s head tipped downwards. “He woke you up?” He scoffed, but there was a hint of embarrassment to his voice. “That kid, I swear—“

“Oh, shut up. I fell back asleep within minutes.” George kicked a clump of hardened clay with his toe and watched it crumble into red dust. Beneath the light of the sunset, the ground beneath their feet was as blazingly orange as lava. It filled George with excitement. “I thought it was very nice. You’re good to him when you want to be.”

“Well, I wasn’t about to let him sit there and bawl like that,” Dream said. “I’m not a monster.”

“I didn’t think you were!” George chuckled. “You’re just tough on him sometimes. It’s like you forget he’s not one of your little soldiers you can order around.”

Dream grunted. “I don’t handle the little soldiers. That’s more Sapnap’s job.”

“Right. You handle me.” George let himself smile as Dream whipped his head towards him, jutting his chin indignantly. “That’s a big enough of a job on its own.”

“You’re such an idiot. I *protect* you, not handle you. There’s a difference.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“You’re a dick.” There was warmth in Dream’s voice. “And you know what I mean.”

More, more, more, George’s brain screamed. “You’ve got no sense of humour,” was what exited his mouth. “Always such a hard-ass.”

“I have plenty of humour. Your jokes are just stupid,” Dream replied smoothly.

“No they’re not. They’re good jokes. People laugh at them.”

“People laugh at them because you’re the king. You’d execute them if they didn’t.”

“I would not! If anything, it’s you the general public would be afraid of. You’re the one with axes.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“*You* fuck off.”

Dream stepped sideways and bumped their sides together, staying close as George lurched to the side to do it back to him. “You’re so annoying.”

George rolled his eyes. “You love me.”

Then he realized. *Oh, fuck.* A nervous laugh bubbled from his throat in the silence that followed and he buried his face in one of his hands, rubbing at his eyes. *Fuck. Fuck. You’re an idiot.*

When he finally mustered the courage to look up again, Dream had his mask pulled to one side of his face, exposing his sparkling eyes to the sun. *He looks good beneath the sun,* George thought, but nothing left his mouth except another half-frantic giggle.

“You’re so weird,” Dream murmured through a smile, crossing his arms in front of him. “This journey’s made you crazy.”

“Probably,” George replied. “I need an actual bed and an actual meal.”

“Well, you’ll get that pretty soon.” Dream lifted his finger and pointed to the distant shape of a town on the horizon, as red as the dirt beneath their feet. “Look at that.”

Glee filled George’s stomach in a burst of colour. *Fucking finally.* “Oh, thank the gods.”

He turned back to Tommy and found him fast asleep upon Carl’s back, drool dribbling from one corner of his open mouth. “Tommy,” he whispered. “We’re almost there.”

“Huh?” Tommy lifted his head and scowled at him blearily. “Wake me up when we’re *there*, then. Idiot.”

“Hey!” Dream snapped. “Don’t call him an idiot. Apologize.”

Tommy shrunk back like a scolded puppy and lowered his head back down into Carl’s mane.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “You woke me up from a nice dream.”

“I’m sorry,” George said, giving Tommy’s bony shoulder a good-natured pat. “But we’re almost in the Badlands. We’re almost home.”

“Thank the gods.” Tommy pushed his face into Carl’s fur. “I need a bath so badly.”

“That makes two of us.”

“We’ll find an inn to stay in — I don’t think any of us want to spend the night in the nether,” Dream said. “Carl deserves an actual stall and good hay for all his good work.”

Tommy wrapped his arms around the horse’s neck and squeezed. “Thanks, buddy. You’re a good horse.”

“Then,” Dream continued. “We’ll hit the portal in the morning and be back in the Antarctic empire in a couple days. Easy enough, if we don’t have distractions.”

George clapped his hands together. “Let’s get on it. I want to get home.”

“Home,” Tommy echoed, his voice both triumphant and filled with longing. “Home, home, home.”

The town’s lights flickered in the distance as if it were beckoning them there.

~

Of course things weren’t going to be easy.

“What do you mean it’s *down*? How can a portal be down?”

The dark-haired portal guard raised his hands defensively. Behind him, the town portal stood empty, looking like no more than a theatre prop with all its terracotta decorations. “Fuck if I know. Usually means there’s piglins causing trouble on the other side. We’re at a bad spot over there.”

Dream brought a hand to his face and squeezed the bridge of his nose. His sunburn itched. “When’s it going to open back up? We have somewhere important to be.”

“Can’t tell. Could be later today, could be a week from now. Get settled somewhere and we’ll have you on your way as quick as possible.”

Tommy kicked at George’s arm. “I’m going to kill someone or die or both.”

The dark-haired portal guard looked up at him and scowled. “I think your boy needs a nap. Or a smack.”

I could smack you right now, Dream thought, gritting his teeth. “I’ll handle my *boy*, thanks. Could you point us to the nearest inn?”

You’d be lucky to find a room anywhere.” The dark-haired portal guard leaned on the portal’s side and wiped sweat off his tanned brow. “There’s some trouble up North, so we’ve got more tourists than normal.”

“What kind of trouble?” George piped in, eyes dark.

“Shady shit, mostly near the SMP kingdom. Unexplained fires and such.”

“Gods Almighty.” Dream glanced back at Tommy, but the child’s attention was thankfully elsewhere. “We’ll find somewhere to go. Thanks for the help.”

The guard waved them off with a grunt, turning to yet another disgruntled traveller carrying a baby upon their back. Just as Dream began to mentally prepare himself for a night in a barn or field again, someone cleared their throat from behind him. “Excuse me?”

Dream turned. A young man stood a foot or so away, smiling nervously. There was a rather large siamese cat lounging over his shoulders. “Do you three need a place to stay for the night?”

“Oh, uh—“ Dream glanced at George, who nodded hastily— “Yeah, we do, actually. Just until the portal opens again.”

“It’s been closing more and more often,” said the young man with a chuckle. “Things are messy up North. We don’t get much news around here, but there are lots of refugees fleeing down South for a little more peace.”

“Wow.” There was a pit in Dream’s stomach. “Crazy shit.”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” The young man turned, hefting a small basket of clothes onto his hip.

“Come on.” He cocked his head down one of the dusty streets. “My husband and I have a stable and a couple spare bedrooms.”

“And a shower?” Tommy piped up.

“And a shower,” the young man replied with a laugh. “I’m Velvet, by the way. This is Ant.”

At the mention of his name, the cat lifted his head and scanned them all with strikingly blue eyes. Velvet scratched the animal’s chin with his finger. “I can’t bear seeing travellers be stranded. You all look exhausted.”

“We are,” Dream said. “We’ve been through a lot.”

Velvet’s eyes focused on Tommy as he slid off Carl’s back, falling into George’s arms as his thin legs wobbled beneath him. “I can see that. You all need rest.”

Well, I can’t argue with that.

By the time they reached Velvet’s neat bungalow, Dream’s legs were shaking. He was more than glad to shrug off his armour and be ushered into the dining room, where he promptly collapsed into one of the chairs. *I think I could sleep for a thousand years.*

George sat down next to him, rubbing at his temples. “Do you have tea?”

Velvet nodded. “Course we do. Ant?”

The Siamese cat hopped off his shoulders onto the table, curling his tail side to side. “Don’t be an ass, Ant,” said Velvet. “Get the men their tea.”

The cat only stared, even as Tommy reached forward and petted it, cooing beneath his breath. Velvet scoffed. “Give him a second. He’s enjoying the attention.”

Dream and George shared a furtive glance. “The cat makes tea?” George asked unsurely.

“He does lots. He also likes to embarrass me.” Velvet put a kettle on the stove and lit a blooming fire beneath it. “Guess I’m making the tea for you two. Be prepared — it’ll suck.”

In a single motion, the cat leapt off the table and seemed to explode mid-air in a burst of colour and light, transforming into a young man faster than Dream could blink. Tommy shrieked in surprise. “What the fuck?”

“You boil the water too hot.” The young man batted Velvet away from the stove and took the tin of tea leaves from his hand. “It makes it sour.”

“My mistake.” Velvet turned to Dream and George and motioned to the young man with an amused smirk. “New friends, this is my husband, Ant.”

“What the hell!” Tommy cried. “You’re the cat?”

“I am!” Ant said, ignoring their palpable surprise. “Thanks for the back scratch by the way. I’ve had an itch all evening.”

Tommy shrunk into one of the dining room chairs, lips curled. Dream couldn’t stop himself from chuckling. “Thank you, both of you. Hopefully we’ll be out of your hair by tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Said Velvet. “Guests are more than welcome here. Would anybody like

a shower?”

“Me!” Tommy said immediately. “I smell like shit.”

“Down the hall and to the left, then. You’ve got free range of the whole bathroom.”

Tommy leapt from his seat and rocketed down the hall, dropping feathers as he went. “Your son has gorgeous wings, by the way,” Said Ant, lowering a mesh cage of leaves into the kettle. “Red’s a good colour on that kid. Fits him.”

Son? Dream’s tongue turned to stone. “Yeah — uh, yeah. He’s a firecracker.”

“Is he yours? You two look rather alike. Even without the—” Ant traced lines over his face—
“Y’know.”

Velvet’s mouth tightened ever so slightly and he delivered a gentle kick to his husband’s ankle. The words came tumbling from Dream’s mouth before he could stop them. “Yeah, yeah. He’s mine.” He pretended not to notice George give him a wide side-eye glance. “Speaking of that, do you have health potions? We were caught without some. I’d rather get those healing before they scar.”

He doesn’t need to look any more like me.

“Of course!” Velvet darted off into another room, returning with two round bottles in his hands. “Melon is plentiful ‘round here. People drink these like beer.”

“Awesome. Thank you.” Dream grabbed one and rolled the other one to George’s fingers. “I’ll go give this to him. George, you stay here.”

“Wasn’t planning on going anywhere,” George replied, red in the neck and cheeks. “But roger that. I’ll be here.”

Gods, I want to bite my tongue off and choke on it. Dream gave another nervous smile and ducked around the hall, pressing the bottle to his forehead until it ached. *This is why I don’t talk to people.*

“Tommy?” Dream approached a closed door at the end of the hall. He could hear the hiss of running water. “Are you in the shower yet?”

“No,” Replied a shaky, muffled voice.

“Can I come in? Are you naked?” Dream tapped the bottle against the door. “I’ve got something for your face.”

“No, come in.”

Dream gently pushed the door open, revealing a small tiled bathroom decorated in shades of orange and teal. Tommy sat against the wall opposite from the sink, knees pulled up into his chest. When Dream slid in and closed the door behind him, Tommy lifted his head and stared up at him with cloudy eyes. “I feel sick.”

Dream set the potion on the counter. “Did you throw up or something? Do you need something to eat?”

“No.” Tommy shook his head. “I looked at myself in the mirror.”

“Oh.” The deep ache of familiarity bloomed in Dream’s chest. *I smashed all the mirrors I came*

near for six months afterwards. I only stopped when I got my mask. “I brought you a potion. It’ll help it not scar.”

“I’m afraid I’ll puke it up,” Tommy said. He buried his face into his knees, leaving bloody flakes on his filthy pants. “I feel all shaky and shit.”

“You need a shower and a good meal and an actual sleep in a bed.” Dream pushed the bottle into Tommy’s hands. “Drink a mouthful. You’ll feel better.”

“Is it my fault that Wilbur died?” Tommy blurted. “Did I do that?”

His hands began to tremble. Dream dwarfed them in his own, squeezing them tightly. Tommy stared up at him with wide eyes. “Absolutely not. That Eretian boy was stupid. The god tried to tell —“

“His name is Foolish!” Tommy interrupted in a snap.

Dream pursed his lips. “*Foolish* tried to tell him that the trident was dangerous. It’s not your fault or Wilbur’s that he didn’t listen.”

“It’s not fair.” Tommy uncorked the bottle and chugged it back like a shot of strong whiskey. “It’s not fair. None of it’s fair. I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“You’re going to heal at home,” Dream said. “Things will get better. Your family will help you.”

“The only one who ever helped me was Wilbur, and now he’s gone.” Tommy pushed the empty bottle back into Dream’s hands and struggled to his feet. “Go away. I want to take a shower.”

“Good. You need it.” Dream tried to smile. “And I might have accidentally told those two nice men that you’re my son, so play along with that, please. George will kick my ass for it later.”

“You’re stupid!” Tommy cried, but a smile broke through on his weary face. “You owe me. I’m going to tell Tubbo all about it and we’re going to make fun of you.”

“I’ll probably deserve it.” Dream clicked the door open again. “Don’t use too much hot water. George needs a shower too.”

“Is George my other dad? Are you two married?” Tommy snorted. “You guys are weird.”

Tell me about it. Dream pointed a finger at him. “Behave yourself. I’m counting on you.”

Tommy only laughed more.

When he returned to the dining room table, George had a mug of tea in front of him and a half-eaten plate of bread and what looked to be fish. “We eat a lot of meat around here,” Antfrost was saying, stretched up into a cupboard with his feet dangling over the floor. “Not much grows here with all the clay in the dirt, but the weather itself is quite nice for legumes if you can keep the dust and animals from your crops.”

George looked up and smiled. “Come eat. You need it.” He pushed the plate into the middle of the table. “You can pick at mine if you’re not hungry enough.”

Dream pushed it back to him. “You eat. You and Tommy need it more than I do.”

“Don’t start with this again,” George groaned. “I think I’ll strangle you if I hear that excuse one more time.”

As if to accentuate his point, George kicked him in the shin beneath the table. “We have enough to go around for three plates,” Velvet said warmly. “But only two spare rooms. Can Tommy sleep alone?”

“Probably,” Dream nodded. “If he needs company, he’ll come find us.”

“Can I ask what happened to his face?” Antfrost turned back to them with another mug in his hand. “Those cuts looked deep.”

An idiot teenager stuffed full of propaganda tried to kill him but ended up murdering his brother and killing himself in the process instead. Dream bit down on his cheek. “We got attacked,” Was all he said. “But he’s okay. He’s a strong kid.”

“Poor boy.” Antfrost’s face grew heavy. “I can’t imagine what you all have been through.”

“We’re better off than most,” George piped in. “Many like us have even less.”

“Damn politics.” Velvet finished his own mug of tea and let it clank back down onto the counter. “Playing with people’s lives like this. Don’t those kings know we’re people?”

George stiffened. “Yeah.”

“Chasing people from their homes with fires started by their shenanigans,” Velvet continued angrily. “Murdering local wildlife, sending them into dangerous mines. An entire mining faction in the SMP kingdom died a couple weeks ago because of a ‘mine explosion’. Bullshit.” He scoffed. “They’re fucking around with the portal, I’m sure of it. Nothing good ever comes from those blasted ender portals.”

“What?” George’s face went white. “What are they trying to do with the portal?”

“Fuck if I know! Break it? Move it? Pull things out of it?” Velvet said. “Whatever king allowed those poor bastards to do that deserves to be beheaded.”

“*Velvet,*” Antfrost chided gently. “That’s not dinner table conversation.”

“Sorry.” Velvet ran a hand through his hair. “I get a little wrapped up in this stuff.”

The shower hummed to a halt. Dream poked George’s hands. “Your turn, George. Get going.”

“Thank the gods.” George stood up and darted away, tension still hanging off his shoulders. Without him there, Dream felt himself shrink slightly beneath Ant and Velvet’s interested gazes. *No more questions, please. I’ll only fuck up things more.*

But Ant and Velvet, as if sensing his discomfort, asked him little more throughout dinner, even when Tommy came bounding back out with visibly smaller face wounds. They ate in somewhat comfortable silence, peppered only by the humorous banter Ant and Velvet passed between each other with the ease of two people who had been by each other’s side for decades.

Safe to say that by the time Ant and Velvet pushed clean pyjamas into their hands and sent them off to their respective bedrooms, Dream’s chest had become an overgrown garden of slithering vines. Their room was small, sporting only a bed — a *single* bed — and a little table of strange plants by the window. Somehow, it felt like both heaven and hell all at once.

“Thank goodness,” George murmured. “I’m so tired.”

George changed quickly and slid beneath the quilted covers, humming comfortably as he settled in. Dream, however, felt as though his hands had turned to ice. Just as he was tugging his tunic off, George spoke again.

“I’ve got my eyes closed. You don’t have to be so nervous.”

Dream bit his tongue. “It’s not that,” he grumbled, pulling the clean top over his blushing face. “I’m just... tired.”

George let out a soft chuckle. “That makes two of us.”

They said nothing as Dream finished changing, nor did they say anything as he lowered himself into bed and tugged the blankets up to his nose. George was warm beside him, mere inches away if even that. The gentle glow of the moonlight smoothed his features, shadowed each individual eyelash and lock of hair that tumbled forward onto his forehead.

He was irrevocably beautiful. Dream was a moth to a flame.

“Hey, idiot.”

One of George’s eyes opened. They were black in the moonlight. “Hey there.”

Dream turned his face back to the ceiling. *Oh gods.* “Comfy?”

“Very. It’s warm in here.”

“Good.” *Aether almighty. Help me.* “I’m glad for that.”

“Hm.” George’s eye closed again. “Thank you. You’ve kept me and your son in one piece throughout all this.”

Dream scoffed. “I’m in my element out here. I like exploring.”

“Even with me slowing you down?”

“Especially with you.” The words hit the air like sparks. Dream’s heart was in his throat. “I like being around you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” George stretched out a finger, just barely tracing the line of Dream’s shoulder. “Very, very mutual.”

His finger trailed downwards, downwards, down his arm and the back of his palm. Breathless, Dream opened his hand ever so slightly, allowing George to lace their fingers together. His hand was soft and warm.

“I think you’re my best friend,” George whispered in his ear.

And I think you’re the still point to my turning world.

Dream turned his head until their foreheads were touching. Every cell in his body was screaming, *singing*, but his limbs felt light and the world around them could have been ablaze for all he cared.

George was the one to lean forward and kiss him. He’d always been the braver one.

“Kiss me back, idiot,” George said against Dream’s lips. He kissed him again, harder this time, and Dream’s frazzled brain finally caught up with him. He lifted his hands to George’s cheeks and

pulled him impossibly closer, drawing him near until their feet, their knees, their heaving stomachs were touching. George was warm, so warm, and Dream would have stayed in that one moment for the rest of eternity if given the chance.

“Wow.” George drew back, remaining close enough for their noses to be touching. He was flushed. “I almost forgot how much I wanted to do that.”

“Me too,” Dream breathed. “I missed you. *I miss* you.”

“I missed you too. You had me convinced that you’d grown tired of me.” He giggled, light and airy. “Guess that wasn’t true.”

Dream pulled him back in for another kiss. “I don’t think I could stop thinking about you if I tried.”

George grinned. “Even with the newfound responsibility as a single father?”

“You’re so annoying.” Dream pressed a kiss to his cheek, his forehead, relishing in the gasp he got when he pressed his lips to the divot beneath George’s ear. “I mean it.”

“You love me.”

“Maybe I do. Doesn’t change the fact that you’re annoying.”

George buried his face in Dream’s shoulder, humming contentedly beneath his breath. “When we get Tommy back home, you’re not leaving my side.”

“Yes, your Highness,” Dream replied smoothly. *I have never been this physically comfortable in my entire life.*

“And we’re going to kick King Eret’s ass together when we find out what he’s done to my kingdom.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

George let out a yawn. “And, when it’s all over and done, I’m never letting you leave me ever again.”

Dream pressed a kiss to his forehead. George stilled, wrapping his arms around Dream’s arm. “Yes, your Highness,” Dream said softly.

George’s only response was a gentle exhale against his collarbone. Dream closed his eyes. His chest felt light.

Goodnight, George.

Nothing could have prepared him for the cold jab of a crossbow arrow against his throat when he woke hours later, the dawn broken by a terrified scream.

Chapter End Notes

a week without uploading and she comes back with shapeshifter Antfrost and whatever

the fuck that ending was

IM SO SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG! burnout is a total bitch. sadly, my updates may be spacing out a little more. My brain ain't workin too well lmao. I may perhaps take a week or so off, depending on how I feel, but rest assured that this story will not go unfinished ♥

fun fact about this chapter: the portal guard is Vikkstar! I thought it would be funny if he was the one to tell Dream to smack tommy so here we are with another cameo 😊 plus we got to see Dream in his Karen arc good for him

yay! An end to the slow burn! I mean they're kinda fucked Rn but at least they got some smooches in before their lives went to shit lmao

thank you once again for all the amazing comments and support on this story. I swear to god that the support keeps me going and motivated when I'm burning out! It makes me so happy!

Follow my tumblr @opheliabloo for links to all my updates!

Stay cheesin my friends!

-Ophelia

The Old King

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Get them to the portal, now.”

The man holding Tommy to his chest pulled him in tighter, trapping his wings against his back. “Kid’s going last. You two, now.”

Dream’s nose was bleeding. His eyes were cloudy, so full of shock that he looked half-asleep. He made no move to stand from his place on his knees. “Now,” the man repeated. “Alyssa, get him up.”

The fair-haired girl holding Dream’s handcuffed hands yanked him upwards by his hair until he stood on unsteady legs, gritting his teeth in pain. George, pressed up against the wall, let out a small noise of distress. Antfrost and Velvet stood in one of the doorways across the room, holding rumpled robes around themselves. “Is this level of brutality necessary?” Velvet said stiffly. “This is not a violent household.”

“Yes” said Alyssa. “They’re dangerous criminals.”

“Dangerous criminals who’ve—“ The man grabbed Tommy’s wrist as he wrenched it free and forced it back to its side— “Kidnapped and brainwashed an Eretian child.”

“Lies!” Tommy wings fought to open, but the man’s hold on him was so strong he could do little more than wiggle around desperately. “Please, you have to believe me. They’re evil and they’re going to *kill* me—“

Alyssa pulled something golden from her pocket and pushed it in Ant and Velvet’s direction. “We’re on royal business through His Majesty King Eret. You can take our word or theirs — your choice.”

When Ant went to open his mouth, the Eretian man holding George added, “Get too much in our way and you could be arrested for harbouring wanted fugitives. Let us take them in peace and you’ll be thanked by King Eret themselves for helping us bring these two to justice.”

“Are you sure you have the right men?” Ant asked nervously. “They’ve been nothing but kind. The child seemed comfortable.”

“Are you aware of what brainwashing entails?” The man snapped. “This child has been missing for months. I’m not sure what they told you, but I can assure you that not a lick of it is true. Punz—“ he cocked a finger out the door— “Get your guy through the portal and come back to help Alyssa. Can’t risk the beast escaping.”

The man holding George pulled him off the wall and forced him out the door, ignoring his struggles. Dream’s eyes focused above Tommy’s head and narrowed into furious, defeated slits. “Leave the fucking kid alone. Leave him with these guys. They’ll take care of him.”

“We can,” Velvet piped up. “We’ve got room and time for him—“

“Nonsense!” The man said. “This child is returning to King Eret’s care, where he belongs. Nobody’s taking him in except us.”

Tommy bashed his head back into the man's chest as hard as he could until stars swam in his eyes, "No," he moaned. "No, no, no."

"You'll be alright, Tommy," Dream said urgently. "We're not going to let anything happen to you. I promise."

Tommy looked at Dream and felt his eyes fill with tears. *This can't be happening. Nobody's here to save me. Wilbur can't save me.*

"Don't talk to him," the man ordered. "We don't need you poisoning him against us any more than you already have."

He leaned his cheek into Tommy's hair. "Don't you remember me, Tommy?" He said, fingers digging into his arm. "Your old friend Ponk?"

"Please help me," Tommy begged Ant and Velvet. Both men seemed rooted to their spots, terror alight in their eyes. "Don't believe them. I'm not kidnapped. *Please.*"

"Can we at least travel back with you?" Ant asked. "Keep him company?"

"Not possible. The last thing we need is for him to be manipulated again." The man turned his head to the door as Punz darted back in. "We'll be on our way. Expect a formal thank you letter in two weeks from His Majesty King Eret."

Punz grabbed Dream's hair and forced his head towards until he was bent forward. "Ponk, have you gotten his armour and axe?"

"I'll come back for it," Ponk replied. He jabbed a finger at Ant and Velvet. "Touch any piece and you'll regret it. Stay where you are."

With a hand each on his arms, Punz and Alyssa dragged Dream out the front door and disappeared out onto the street. *Fight, Dream!* Tommy wanted to scream to the air. *Don't let them take us! Don't let them do this!*

But there came no sounds of a scuffle, no hope for Tommy's heart to latch on to. For the first time in his life, he'd seen Dream defeated.

The realization filled him with more terror than he'd ever felt before.

"Come on," The man — Ponk? Tommy couldn't even remember — said in a low tone. His voice was gentle, quiet like a snake in waiting. "Let's get you going home, kiddo. King Eret misses you more than anything."

"My home is in the Antarctic Empire!" Tommy cried. "Not with you guys!"

The man ignored him, merely lifting his feet from the ground as he stood and carried Tommy to the door. "I know it's hard to see him in distress, but this is for the best," he said. His voice made Tommy want to tear him to shreds with his bare hands. "You two seem like respectable men. Look back on this moment with pride."

He turned, pulling Tommy with him, and left the house without another word.

Tommy could have sworn Velvet mouthed *I'm sorry* to him as they left.

There were more Eretians waiting outside by the portal, bustling and excited. The pink-haired lady

stared Tommy down as they neared a windowless carriage propped outside the portal, her sallow face rife with righteous indignation. “Let’s get going,” she said, forcing a pair of handcuffs onto Tommy’s wrists. “It’s so dusty out here.”

“Fuck you,” Tommy spat. “I’ll kill you.”

Without hesitating, the pink-haired woman cracked the back of her palm across Tommy’s cheek, leaving white-hot agony in its wake. “Been wanting to do that,” she said softly. “Wish Jack was here to watch it.”

Jack. The name she’d screamed back at the temple, high and loud and full of grief. *He died with his eyes open. He didn’t even have time to close them.*

Wilbur had time to close his eyes. Tommy wasn’t sure whether that was for the better or the worst.

“Do we knock him out?” Ponk asked. “He’s little, but he can fly. Do we risk—“

“I’ve seen what this kid can fuck up,” said the pink-haired lady with a scowl. “Knock him out.”

Ponk let out a snort. “Yes, ma’am.”

He let go of Tommy’s shoulders and kicked in his knees, sending him crashing to the dusty ground. Before Tommy had a chance to do more than stare hatefully up at the pink-haired woman as she turned away, a sour-smelling cloth descended over his mouth and nose. Nausea hit him in a static-filled wave; within seconds, his vision had faded into swirls of muted colour. He felt his cheek hit the dirt and sink into nothingness.

Dad, help me. Wilbur can’t anymore.

~

“Dad?”

Techno rapped his fingers against the chancery’s golden doors. There came no answer. *Aether Almighty. Please don’t still be in bed.* “Dad?”

He pushed the door forward until it clicked, then paused. “Are you in here?” Techno said, louder.

After a moment, a voice. “Yes, sorry.”

Thank the gods. Techno let himself in, pushing the door closed behind him. The old door squealed as it shut, sounding about as weary as Techno felt. His father stood at the other end of the room, back turned to him, sitting on one of the raised windowsills. Wilbur had done that, once upon a time — leaned up against the cool glass with his legs dangling, watching the knights or Tommy and his friends spar in the courtyard below because he couldn’t be bothered to listen to whatever his father was trying to teach him. Phil could have very well been sitting in his ghost.

Perhaps, Techno thought, feeling weight draw down on his bones. *That’s what he’s going for.*

“Is everything alright?” Said his father gently. “Are they home yet?”

Techno shook his head before realizing his father couldn’t see. “Not yet. Knights couldn’t find them either. They’re not on the nether path yet.”

Phil let out a sigh. It trembled ever so slightly. “Send them out above. They have to be somewhere.”

“Already done.”

“Good. Thank you, Technoblade.” Phil turned, beckoning him closer. He had his crown sitting in his hands. “Come here.”

Techno walked to his father’s side, drawing his fingers through a line of dust that had accumulated on his father’s desk. There was never dust on his father’s desk. “How are you feeling?”

“You know I can’t answer that question,” Phil replied. “But I do feel some peace with Wilbur resting in the mausoleum. He’s safe in there.”

Techno shifted; the weight of the bag over his shoulder thumped against his hip. *That’s my next stop, but you can’t know that.* “Good. He’s got grandpa and mum in there with him. They’ll take care of him.”

“Kristin always wanted boys.” Phil smiled, but it didn’t stop his voice from tightening. “Now she’s got one.”

A lump rose in Techno’s throat and he forced it down. *I didn’t cry when he died, I didn’t cry when we locked him in a stone box for the rest of eternity — I’m not crying now.* “Then we know he’s happy. That’s all that matters, right?”

“Right,” Phil said. Techno knew he didn’t mean it. “I have something I want to tell you, Techno. I pray you give me your ear.”

Techno stepped closer. “You only talk like an Old Ender Order priest when you mean business.”

Phil chuckled emptily. “You can certainly call this business.” He lifted his leg and tapped the other end of the windowsill with his heel. “Come sit with your dad, just like you used to.”

“I don’t think my wings will fit,” Techno scoffed, but he found himself wrapping his wings around himself and squeezing in nonetheless. “My feathers are going to look like shit after this.”

“Let them,” said Phil. “You’re too well-groomed, anyway. It makes me look old.”

“You *are* old.”

“I’m not even forty yet!”

“Four whole decades.” Techno made a gagging noise. “They make good whiskeys younger than you.”

“Gods almighty.” Phil turned his head to the window and leaned his forehead on the glass. “I’m not sure how to start this.”

Techno pulled his bag into his lap and allowed his fingers to squeeze the hard shape within. “I feel like I’m about to be scolded.”

“No, not at all.” Phil shook his head. “I’d have a much easier time doing that. Not that I ever had to scold you much in your life...”

He trailed off, brow furrowed, eyes focused on the crown in his hands. “Techno,” he said after a long moment, “I want to make you king.”

Techno blinked. “You... *what?* ”

“I want to make you king,” Phil repeated. He turned the crown over in his hands, rubbing over the carved runes with his thumbs. “I’m not fit anymore. I probably haven’t been for a while.”

“What do you mean? You’re a great king!” Techno cried. “You don’t need to retire!”

Phil pursed his lips. “That’s not the only issue. I’m a fine king. If that was my only duty in life, I’d be set.”

“What other duty do you have?” Techno get his wings began to bristle. *No more change. Nothing more can change in my life right now.*

Phil’s face hardened. “The duty I just failed by letting your brother die!”

“That wasn’t a failure on your part!” Techno stood, letting his wings unfurl behind him. “You can’t blame yourself for what happened, Dad. It was a complete accident—“

“I can’t be a father and a king at once. It’s just not possible anymore.” Phil swallowed, his jaw tightening. “I’ll still guide you in your duties. I’m not just dumping this on your plate and leaving.”

“I wouldn’t care if you were! That’s not the problem!” Techno said. “You can’t punish yourself for this. Giving up your crown isn’t the answer.”

“I’m not punishing myself!” Phil replied, his eyes wide and pleading. “I just want to be the father I should have been all these years. Tommy needs more than what I can give as king and I’m not about to let him slip through my fingers any more than he already has.”

Techno opened his mouth to answer but his tongue was too heavy to move. He moved to his father’s desk and collapsed in the cool leather chair, rubbing at his temples as a headache bloomed between them. “You can say no,” Phil pressed. “I’m trusting you to tell me the truth about this.”

“Give me a second.” Techno closed his eyes. “You can’t blame yourself for Wilbur’s death. I won’t let you.”

Phil’s breath hitched as he turned back to the window. “The last thing he said to me was that he hated me,” he said slowly. “That I hadn’t known who Tommy was for years.”

“He didn’t mean it. He was angry.”

“He was angry for a good reason. I chose you over him and his brother, Techno. He knew that. *You* know that.”

Guilt sliced though Techno’s stomach like a carving knife. “No you didn’t. You loved all three of us equally.”

“That’s easy for you to say — you got my time, my energy, for years on end. Tommy’s nearly thirteen and can’t write or sleep in a bed by himself most of the time. How can you say that isn’t a failure on my part?”

“Tommy could have tried harder! Tommy could have grown up!” Techno exclaimed. Frustration began to build in his jaw, his fists, along the length of his shoulders. “I could have handled it at his age!”

“That doesn’t matter, Techno! He’s different than you!” Phil said.

“Every kid is different! Tommy is a nightmare!”

A ball of ice hit Techno's stomach as his father's face twisted into a scowl. "Don't talk about him like that. Not anymore. I forbid it."

"You want to give up your kingdom for him, Dad. What if he doesn't get better? What if he's like this at fifteen, or eighteen?" Techno threw up his hands. "What if he's more than you can handle for the rest of your life?"

"Then that's a risk I'm willing to take."

Phil glided to the desk and placed the crown down between them. "I'll never forgive myself for what happened to Wilbur. That's a scourge I'll bear until the day I can apologize to him face to face." He pushed the crown forwards with a finger. "But while I'm here, I have to try and fix things with Tommy while I still can."

An emerald in one of the crown's spokes glimmered in the silver sunlight, casting patterns over the desk's surface. Techno grabbed the crown in both hands. It was heavier than his own. "I worry you'll regret this."

A sardonic smile crossed Phil's face. "I've tasted regret already, mate. Can't get much worse than it already is."

"This isn't you punishing yourself?"

"Of course not. It's me doing what's right for all of us."

"And you'll still be my right-hand man?"

"You won't have a moment's privacy."

"Good." Techno pushed the crown back into Phil's hands. There was so much emotion screaming in his chest that it whited out into numbness. "Don't make me regret this, Dad."

Phil's face softened with relief. "Stand up, then. Let's get the boring part over with."

Techno stood, feeling energy crackle along his spine, and kneeled before Phil's feet. "I, King Phil of the Royal Antarctic Empire, in sound of mind and body and soul, beneath the eyes of the Aether Almighty," His father began, lifting the crown over Techno's head, "Pass my kingdom and the duties therein to my firstborn son, Technoblade."

The crown settled into his hair, heavy but somehow uncumbersome. "I hereby relinquish my role as monarch and the power I hold as head of state. These powers are hereby delegated to my firstborn son, Technoblade."

Repetitive, Techno thought, hiding a smile.

"Technoblade, do you hereby swear an oath to protect the people, livestock and territory of the Royal Antarctic Kingdom?"

Techno nodded, feeling the crown shift as he did. "I do."

"Do you hereby swear to protect the public interests and national values of the Royal Antarctic Empire against enemy forces?"

"I do."

"Do you hereby swear to remain truthful under the eyes of the Aether Almighty and live your

kinghood in righteousness, fairness and honour?”

“I do.”

“Then by the grace of the gods and your dear mother and brother before me, I now pronounce you reining monarch of the Royal Antarctic Empire.” Phil touched his shoulder and Techno rose to his feet. “May you serve this country well.”

He stepped forward and hugged Techno tightly. “I’m so proud of you. I love you so much.”

Techno buried his face in his father’s shoulder. He smelt of sweat, of grief, of deep and aching sadness, but also of home. “I love you too, Dad. I’ll make you proud.”

“You always have.”

They stayed like that for a long moment, rocking slightly from side to side, until Phil finally pulled back and smiled at him with moist eyes. “We’ll have to do a rain check on the public coronation and parade. I don’t think anyone’s in too much of a partying mood right now.”

“Fine by me,” Techno said, slipping the crown from his head. “I’ll wait until Tommy gets home to start wearing this around. It’ll be easier for everyone.”

“Good idea.” Phil turned his head to the window. It had begun to snow. “Are you off to see Ranboo now?”

Techno shook his head. “No, I’m giving the kid a break. He and Tubbo haven’t spoken for a couple days, so he’s not in the mood for paperwork.”

“Not speaking?” His father’s face dropped with worry. “They had a fight? Should I go speak to them?”

Techno chuckled. “Leave them be. They’ve both been stressed these last couple weeks. They’ll figure it out themselves.”

When Phil only frowned, unconvinced, Techno said, “I’m going to go take a walk and clear my head. I suggest you go find something to eat, former king. I’m sending us both out to look for Tommy if he’s not back by tomorrow.”

Phil snorted, but his eyes were shining and soft, as though a great weight had been taken off his shoulders. “Yes, your Highness,” he said with a wink. “Wear a scarf and don’t catch cold.”

Techno had made it all the way down to the looming stone doors of the basement mausoleum before the realization of his situation careened into him like a sack of rocks. *I’m king*, he thought. *I’m actually king.*

He put a hand on one of the doors’ handles. It was cool beneath his fingers. His knees wanted to wobble but his wings felt strong, aching to open and shoot him into the sky. Up, up he could fly — past the clouds, past the wind, into where he could graze the atmosphere with his fingers and pluck the sun right out of the sky if he wanted to. He was king, now. He could do whatever he wanted.

It was the weight of his bag that brought him back down from his daydreams.

I have a job to do.

He could count how many times he’d been in the mausoleum on one hand. As the stone door

grated open, moaning as it was pulled from its usual resting place, the smell of dried flowers and mildew on stone filled Techno's nose. "Ugh," he said aloud, flinching when his voice bounced off the grey pillars and echoed in his ears. *I hate it down here.*

Wilbur's tomb sat at the end of the room, on the left, between their grandfather's austere crypt and the intricate grave of the mother they'd never met. It was plain — the carvers had not yet finished his headstone or any of the other grave details — but the mounds of wilting blue flowers that lay upon the stone box brought a splash of colour that was welcome to Techno's eyes. He stepped forward, feeling a chill on his wings. "I can't remember if you ever believed in ghosts," he said. After a moment, he added, "I realize now I can't remember much about you at all."

If he squinted, the bunches of blue flowers became eyes, all staring at him. Some in distaste, some in curiosity — it all depended on the angle and the light streaming in from the small windows at the tops of the walls. Techno blinked. He liked them better as flowers.

"I can't tell if you'll be insulted by this, but I can't figure out a better place to put this. It'll make life interesting for a grave robber, that'll be sure." Techno set his bag atop his mother's grave. "Sorry, Mum. Ground's too dusty."

The bag's flap fell open. Techno could see the item inside, glimmering. He turned away, feeling ice on his tongue. "This better not be loud."

He grabbed the lid of Wilbur's tomb and pulled it hesitantly. It was heavy, yes, but the passage of time had thankfully not yet rooted it in place. Techno pulled it more, more, then grabbed it as it went to tip and lowered it to the ground. He cracked his aching knuckles and sighed. "They trying to keep you from ever getting out?" He said to the air with a laugh.

His laugh echoed back at him; that was enough of an answer.

Techno grabbed his bag, pulling out the single item within. *This fucking thing.* He turned it in his hands, feeling the solid weight between his fingers.

Totems of Undying were a lot smaller than they looked in photos.

"Can't risk anyone finding this," he said. "I don't even think Dad knows I swiped it from the temple. Fuck, I couldn't just *leave* it."

He approached the open tomb and felt dread pour down his spine like icy water. Wilbur's body was covered in a sheet from head to toe, his wings curled in front of him in a sort of protective shield. They, like everything else in that damned mausoleum, were grey. "I'm keeping this with you," he announced, as though Wilbur could actually be listening. *This is so stupid, but I can't stop myself.* "If that offends you, haunt me. I don't care."

He couldn't bring himself to uncurl Wilbur's wings and place the totem between his cold, limp hands, so he elected to lift the sheet off his polished dress shoes and slide the totem in there, covering them both afterwards. "There. It's like you're standing on it."

The humour must have been lost on Wilbur, for he didn't offer any sort of reply. Techno pressed his palms into his eyes. "I think I'm going crazy in here. I sure hope you don't hate it in here as much as I do."

He hefted the tomb lid back on as quick as he could, then rearranged the flowers into their original places. All the while, the chill down his spine would not leave him. "It was nice seeing you," he said when he was done. "I hope you're with mum. I hope she's nice. Tell her I can't wait to meet

her, but that I also want to wait another sixty or seventy years to meet her. No offence.”

It was both relieving and painful to push the stone door back into place and fly up the staircase like there was a ghost at his heels.

Maybe Ranboo would be ready for a little work.

Chapter End Notes

TECHNO POV POG

fun fact: I totally forgot that I just did nothing with the totem that was supposed to revive Wilbur bc I'm stupid and woke up in the middle of the night after dreaming of it and wrote TECHNO HAS TOTEM???? in a notes app doc before falling asleep again so here's this chapter lol

I love the Eretians and their sexy sexy manipulation and also Nikki being just a straight up spiteful nasty bitch. She deserves to have full villainhood no redemption arcs for her she's MAD and MEAN and GOOD FOR HER

ohohohoho! I wonder what the Eretians are going to want with our new hostages! I mean it's obvious with George but what shall they do with dear old Tommy and Dream!!!! What sneaky little tricks will they play??? we shall see!!!

happy pride month you wonderful people!

-Ophelia

Captive

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream had been in his cell for hours. How many, exactly? He wasn't sure. He tried to count the minutes, to force his brain to keep some semblance of time, but his mind wandered with every footstep he heard booming above his head. There were no windows in the dungeon, no way to see the sun. For all he knew, it was dark again.

In all that time, he hadn't seen George or Tommy. He'd awoken alone, stripped of his ability to say goodbye to either of them before they were inevitably slaughtered. *Oh gods.* Dream buried his face into his hands. He had no armour, no axe, not even his damned mask. *At least they'll kill me too once they get bored of me.*

More time passed, dripping terror into his veins. He felt like a kid again; bruised and defeated, crouched in the corner of a jail cell like a caged animal. But where salvation came to him that first time, now before him sat slaughter. *I've failed. I've actually failed.* Dream let his back hit the wall. He slid downwards, dragging his back against the cold concrete. *I've killed us all.*

His mind, ever the torturer, wandered to George. George, who he'd let be captured after swearing to never leave his side. George, who could already be dead. And, if he wasn't dead, what horrors was he enduring? What awful fate had Dream's own cowardice doomed him to? Bitter tears gathered in the corners of his eyes and dribbled down his cheeks. *This is what you get for loving me.* He licked at them with a dry tongue. *I warned you that loving me wasn't worth it. I warned myself not to get comfortable. Now it looks like we'll both die with regrets.*

One night. One blissful night. That was all the world allowed Dream to have.

How cruel.

The door at the end of the hall swung open and a single figure entered. Dream found himself crouching instinctively, tucking his limbs into the corner of the cell until he was as small as could be. He'd done it as a child after nightmares, during storms, when his brain was a whirlwind of sparks and snarls and the world felt like unravelling spools of threads cascading from his hands. When not even Sappnap would be awake to see him cower.

The figure approached Dream's cell. Dream closed his eyes.

"Hi."

Hannah. A lightning jolt of unbearable fury ripped through Dream's chest and he was on his feet before he knew it, hands flying through the bars of his cell to *grab* and *tear* and *strangle the everloving shit out of*. Hannah stumbled back, eyes wide but not surprised. Her thorny necklaces and bracelets had grown up her arms and neck and into her hair, dotting the dark waves with blooming roses in all stages. She wore the Eretian soldier's uniform.

"You make me fucking sick," he spat.

"The feeling is mutual." Hannah shoved an apple into his grasping hands. "Eat. Now."

Dream fought the urge to launch it back into her face, opting instead to hold it in one hand and squeeze it until it cracked, spilling juice onto his palm. *I'll do it to your precious king's skull if he*

lays even a single finger on George and Tommy.

Hannah bared her teeth in a snarl. “I said eat it. You’re not getting any more food unless I see you finish it.”

Dream took a bite, but his throat closed before he could swallow. He spat it back at her feet. “Don’t be stupid,” Hannah said. “I am trying to give you an olive branch. His Majesty wants you to eat.”

“Where are George and Tommy?” Dream retreated back into his cell, forcing down another bite of the apple. It was smaller than the ones they had at home, sweet on his tongue like a fig full of dead wasps. “What have you done with them?”

“King Eret is not cruel,” Hannah replied. “They intend to do well with both Manburg and the SMP kingdom. This is right.”

“Manburg is under the control of the Antarctic Empire!” Dream said. “It’s not yours! King Phil will never give it up.”

“Perhaps not normally.” Hannah stepped closer, her vines curling around the iron bars. “But we have something he wants.”

“He won’t give you shit if you kill George or Tommy. You’ll be shooting—“

“We are not killing Tommy,” Hannah interrupted. “Not unless we have to. He is not king; we’d get nothing from his death. We want...” She paused, biting her tongue between her lips as if debating on whether to continue. “A trade.”

“A trade? Tommy for Manburg?” Dream’s knees felt weak. “That’s it?”

“Not exactly. Manburg is not officially ours until the royal bloodline is gone. George has no heir; his bloodline ends with him. Manburg’s prior king, however, does.”

Tubbo. Dream stiffened. “No. Phil won’t.”

“He will,” Hannah said simply. “We have ways of being persuasive. I want that apple done when I come back.”

Oh, gods. Dream watched Hannah turn and leave, bringing her vines and her roses and Dream’s hope along with her. *This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.*

George was as good as dead, though it stung so agonizingly to even consider. The SMP kingdom was already under their rule — why keep the sole royal heir alive any longer than they had to? Tommy was only a prince, a bargaining chip. If he was lucky, the Eretians would keep their word and release him if Phil handed over his best friend to be slaughtered. *Gods— is that any better than dying?*

Dream clasped his hands together. “George,” he whispered aloud. “If you’re already dead and watching over me, either to haunt me because you hate me or to look after me or whatever, go and give your ghostly wisdom to Phil. He needs it more than I do.”

He couldn’t feel George’s presence in the air around him, but he wouldn’t dare let himself hope that he was still alive. He’d been through situations like that with the knights — when you got dragged away into the darkness or swept under rocks in a stream, the rest pushed on and assumed you dead. Missions were time sensitive; you couldn’t go back to find your friends.

The familiarity of the situation did nothing to make it less painful.

He finished the apple reluctantly, fighting back vomit with each bite. Petulance would do him no good, especially now that the Eretians had proved themselves capable of torture after being provoked. Just as Dream had begun to pick the seeds from the apple's scrawny core and split them between his teeth, Hannah returned once more, holding a wooden bowl in her hands. "Hello," she said, as though they were friends. "Look what I've got."

To Dream's surprise, she sat before the bars and crossed her legs, setting the bowl between them. "Your old favourite."

Dream lifted his head from where he'd tucked it behind his knees and peered over the bowl's wooden ledge. Walnuts. A whole bowl of them. He blinked. "Walnuts?"

Hannah nodded, a small smile crossing her face. "Yeah. We have lots here." She plucked one between two fingers and set it on the ground. "Can you crack it for me?"

Dream stopped himself before he went to instinctively stand. "No." He slumped back down. "Do it yourself."

Hannah pouted. "I can't. Please?"

"We're not friends!" Dream shouted. "Why the fuck are you down here? Go hang out with your murderer buddies and ask *them* to crack your fucking walnuts!"

He buried his face in his knees again. *Go away. Please just go away.* Hannah lapsed into silence with a small sigh, and neither of them spoke for the next long while. Dream felt walnuts tap against his feet as Hannah rolled them into his cell, but he didn't give her the satisfaction of a reply. Perhaps she'd leave if she got bored.

"George is still alive."

That caught Dream's attention. Hesitantly, he lifted his eyes to meet hers. Hannah's mouth was set into a small frown, eyes focused on the walnut in her hands. "You heard me. He is still alive."

"Don't fucking lie to me."

"I'm not!"

"I know you people," Dream hissed. "You don't take prisoners."

"I can bring him to you! Ah, well—" she paused. "I can ask, at least."

Please. Please do. "Why?" Dream asked, baring his teeth. "What do you want in return?" *I can't let him die without saying goodbye.*

"Just for you to talk to me! We could be friends!" Hannah put her hands on the bars. "Your life doesn't have to end here, in this cell. You can be reborn here, Dream."

"Reborn? *Reborn*?" Dream bit back a crazed laugh. "You think I'd want to be reborn here? With you guys?"

"King Eret gave me everything!" Hannah cried. Vines began to climb from her wrists, up her fingers and through the slats of the bars. "He could give it to you too!"

"King Eret is a fucking criminal," Dream leaned closer to the bars. "They're about to murder the

person I care most about on this fucking planet, and you think you can come in here and expect me to jump at joining your side?"

"He understands our people, Dream. The forest people. King George and his damned father wanted to starve us off the map!"

"George is not his father!" Dream cried. "He's not cruel!"

"You grew up bound to him by a contract forced upon you by threat of death. No wonder you see him in such high regard." Hannah scowled. "He's got you brainwashed."

I could fucking strangle you. Fury crackled in Dream's chest like an open flame. "Hypocritical coming from you. Eret's got you so under his thumb that you'd believe the sky was green if he told you so."

"King Eret is smart, smarter than any of the kings you prostrate yourself before. He'd give you a home, a community, a life like the one you would have lead had you not been captured and forced into slavery." The earnestly in Hannah's eyes made Dream's neck tingle. "I could leave if I wanted to. George would make sure you were nothing without him."

"That's not true. I know it isn't."

"You keep telling yourself that." Hannah stood, and her greenery retreated. "Think about what I have said. Try and open that big old heart of yours." She gave him a sad smile. "George is dying anyway — why should you go down with him?"

She left. Dream was glad to see her go.

That didn't stop the tears.

~

Phil and Techno didn't take horses when they left. It was easier, they said — Techno was faster than most horses while flying and Phil wanted to be as unencumbered as possible in case they had to make another mad dash home. Ranboo watched from the chancery window as they packed their bags, flanked by soldiers on either side. One of them had big green wings. They were pretty.

The door creaked open behind him. "They're outside," he said quickly, hoping whatever servant or soldier had come knocking would leave him to his peace, but whoever stood in the doorway behind him made no move to leave.

"Why are you ignoring me?"

Tubbo? Ranboo turned, eyes wide. Sure enough, his friend stood in the half-open doorway, arms crossed, mouth pulled into a scowl. There was a level of desperation in his eyes. "What?"

"You're ignoring me," Tubbo said sharply. "You haven't talked to me in days."

That was the truth — Ranboo had barely seen him since their fight days before. He hadn't been *ignoring* him, though. Upon seeing Ranboo at the end of a hallway or walking into a room in which he was reading or working, Tubbo would simply turn on his heel and run away without a single word. Ranboo took that as him not being ready to talk, so he'd continued to give his friend the space he thought he needed.

Tubbo obviously disagreed with his methods of solving conflict.

“You’ve been the one avoiding me,” Ranboo said. “I thought you needed space.”

“You’re supposed to come follow me! You’re supposed to show you care!” Tubbo stamped his foot. “I thought you were my *friend*, Ranboo.”

“I *am* your friend.” Ranboo frowned. “That’s why I didn’t want to force you into talking with me. And you even told me not to come looking for you when you stomped away!”

“So you were just going to let me be lonely and shit until I came crawling back?”

“Yeah, kind of! That’s what you do when someone asks to be alone!”

Tubbo stepped in and slammed the door behind him. “Fuck you!” He snapped. “I thought you were supposed to be my best friend. Now you’re being mean to me!”

Ranboo swallowed the lump in his throat. *I don’t like being yelled at.* “You’re the one being mean! Did you come in here just to scream at me?”

“I came in here to figure out if you were still my friend or not!”

“Of course I’m still your friend!” Ranboo’s voice cracked. “I was just giving you space!”

“Well I don’t *want* space!”

“Then what did you *ask* for space?”

“Shut up!” Tubbo clapped his hands over his ears. “You’re being mean again!”

Ranboo turned away, burying his face in his hands. *Aether Almighty.* He collapsed into Phil’s chair at his desk, pulling a random piece of parchment closer. “Then leave! I don’t want to be yelled at.”

Tubbo’s face had gone beet red. “You’re being a dick!” He screamed.

“And you’re starting to sound like Tommy!”

That made Tubbo stop in his tracks, mouth open but unmoving. Ranboo forced himself to set his jaw. “You’re having a tantrum,” he said. “And I don’t want to hear it. You can come back here when you’re calmer, and then we’ll talk.”

He’d heard those words before, through muffled bedroom doors, over the sound of Tommy’s familiar sobbing. Wilbur’s voice had always been steadier, more sure, more calm, but Ranboo felt the slightest bit of bravery course through his veins as he watched Tubbo’s face change. *Thanks, Wilbur. I wish I could thank you in person.* “I mean it,” he added. “If you want, I’ll come find you in your room in a couple minutes. We can talk there.”

Tubbo pursed his lips shut. His eyes were wide, shining with tears that hadn’t yet fallen. He drew in a shuddering breath through his nose, then another, then another. His face twisted in the blink of an eye. With a strangled cry, he dashed to one of the decorative couches by the far windows and threw himself upon it, beating his fists against the upholstery as he screamed at the top of his lungs. Ranboo watched him, half in shock and half in waiting, as he wailed and punched at the cushions and kicked the pillows onto the floor. A minute passed. His frantic bawling became sobs, then cries, then whimpers. It was only when he quieted completely did Ranboo rise from his seat and sit down on the floor at the couch’s side. “Tubbo?” He said.

Tubbo was trembling. “Is this how Tommy feels? When he’s angry?” He whispered.

“I mean, you’d have to ask him,” Ranboo replied softly. He laid a hand on Tubbo’s back and began to move it in slow circles. “But I think so. You sure sounded like him.”

“I miss him so badly.” Tubbo sobbed again, but the noise was quiet with defeat. “I hate him for being gone. He’s not supposed to be gone. You guys are supposed to be here with me.”

“He’ll come back.” Ranboo rested his cheek against Tubbo’s back. “And I’m here with you.”

“No,” he moaned. “You were going to leave me too. You’re mad at me.”

“I was a little angry, but only because you were yelling at me. I wasn’t going to abandon you. You’re my best friend.”

Tubbo shifted, twisting onto his other side, and threw his arms around Ranboo’s shoulders. “Please don’t stop being my friend.”

His tears stung a little against Ranboo’s shoulder, but he didn’t mind. He’d forgotten how nice it was to be hugged. “I’ll never stop being your friend. Maybe only if you become an Eretian.”

Tubbo crinkled his nose. “I’d *never* become an Eretian.”

“Then you’ve got nothing to worry about!”

Tubbo laughed, and the sound was as sweet as bells. “I wish Tommy was here. I just want my friends.” He pulled back, wiping snot off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “I don’t want to be king, Ranboo. I’m scared.”

“You’re not going to be king until you’re an adult,” Ranboo said. “And I bet you can ask Phil to keep your country for longer if you want. He won’t mind.”

“My dad would be so ashamed of me. I don’t think he ever believed I could be king.”

“You’re only twelve! There’s lots of growing you have to do still. Think Technoblade could have been king at twelve if King Phil died?”

Tubbo bit his lips to keep from giggling again. “Bad example — He’s *Technoblade*,” Ranboo cut in with a chuckle. “But, like, a normal person wouldn’t! Leave it to Phil and Techno for a couple years. They’ll handle it well.”

“Maybe.” Tubbo pressed his face back into Ranboo’s shoulder and inhaled deeply. “Thank you.”

There came a knock at the door, making the two of them jump. Ranboo pulled back and straightened his shoulders. “Come in!” He called.

“Royal mail,” said a servant as they entered, holding a single envelope in their hands. The seal was purple.

“Leave it here with me,” Ranboo said. The servant nodded, placing it on the corner of the desk, and slipped out as quietly as they came. “I’m in charge of mail while they’re gone,” he said proudly, rising to his feet and wiping the dust from his knees. “I’m learning lots. Techno’s a good teacher.”

“Who’s the letter from?” Tubbo asked.

Ranboo plucked the envelope off the table and inspected it. The wax seal was familiar, but he couldn’t place it. It sure looked expensive. “Not sure,” he said. He picked up the letter opener and

gently pried the envelope open, slipping out the single piece of neatly-folded parchment within. "This is good paper though."

"Hm." Tubbo leaned back, eyeing it warily. "Open it."

Ranboo did. Then he read it, and he read it again. And again. When his knees crumpled and he collapsed to the floor, he found himself unable to stop reading. "Ranboo?" Tubbo said nervously. "What's on there?"

Ranboo heard him stand. *I can't let him read this*, he thought wildly. Instinctively, he shot to his feet and raised his arm out of Tubbo's reach as he neared, holding the letter above both of their heads. His heart was beating so quickly he could barely feel it pumping at all.

"Ranboo!" Tubbo cried. "Let me see!"

I have to tell Techno. I have to tell Phil. Ranboo dashed to the window, practically punching it open. The soldiers had dispersed, but Phil and Techno were thankfully still on the ground, poring over a map Techno held. "Techno!" Ranboo screamed. He felt Tubbo yank the letter from his fingers. "Techno! Phil! Your— Your Highnesses!"

Techno looked up, squinting. "A letter!" Ranboo yelled down to him. *How can I explain what it says? Are there even words?*

"Ranboo," Came Tubbo's quiet voice. "This is from—"

Techno landed in the open window, blowing Ranboo back. "What?" He said. His eyes were wide. "A letter?"

He hopped in, swiping the letter from Tubbo's frozen hands. Phil landed behind him, hair tousled, his face a mix of confusion and fright. "Techno?" He said, but his son's attention had already been pulled away. His eyes fell on the discarded envelope, onto the purple seal, and he drew in a wordless breath of terror.

"Fuck." Techno put a hand in his hair. He stuck the letter out in his father's direction. "Read it."

Ranboo slid to Phil's side as he took the letter in his shaking hands, peeking over his shoulder as he read. The lines were short, the print regal and neat, but the words sent icy claws down Ranboo's back.

Honourable King Phil,

We have your son, King George of the SMP Kingdom, and his knight. You alone are to bring the Manburg heir to us in two days' time. In exchange for him, we will release your son to you safely. You are not permitted to be armed, nor are you allowed to bring any soldiers with you.

Should these conditions be unmet in any way, you will receive your son's head in a box.

Best wishes,

His Majesty King Eret the First.

An unsettling stillness seemed to overtake Tubbo. "You have to take me there," He said, his voice far too calm. "We have to save Tommy."

"I am not giving you up for slaughter," Phil hissed immediately. "There has to be another way."

“They’ve made their conditions clear on purpose, Dad. We can’t risk it.” Techno took the letter from his father’s hands. “I’m not about to risk Tommy’s life by flanking myself with guards.”

“Techno—“ Phil started, but his son cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand. “I should—“

“I’m king now. I’m going.” Techno’s voice was firm. *King?* Ranboo blinked. To his surprise, only Phil bowed his head. “I’m not about to let Tommy or Tubbo die.”

“They want my kingdom,” Tubbo piped in. “If they finish my bloodline, they get automatic control. I *have* to die.”

“I know that,” Techno said. “And you don’t *have* to die. Stop talking like that.”

Ranboo’s knees felt weak. The world seemed to shift around him, moving forward when he was rooted to the spot. *I think I’m going to be sick.* He clasped his hands behind his neck and pressed down, trying hard to breathe steadily through his nose. It wasn’t working. He wanted to be in bed, be asleep, be away from the cloud of dread that loomed above them.

Yet, somehow, he didn’t want to leave Tubbo’s side either.

“We’re leaving now,” Tubbo ordered. “We have to save Tommy. Techno, come on. Take me there.”

Techno stepped forward and put his hand on Tubbo’s shoulder. “Come on, no rush. Dad, prepare the horses. Ranboo…” he paused. “Ranboo, you hold things steady here. I believe in you.”

“I’m coming.” His voice was so weak. So embarrassingly weak. “I’m coming with you guys.”

“It’s too dangerous, Ranboo. They might think you’re a guard,” Tubbo said. He reached out and clasped Ranboo’s shaking hand in his own. They were cold. “Protect Tommy when he comes back.”

“I’m coming!” Ranboo repeated through gritted teeth.

“No you’re not!” Tubbo said.

“I just told you I wouldn’t abandon you!” A tear dribbled down his cheek. It stung. “I’m not leaving you to die!”

Tubbo stepped forward and wrapped him in a bone-crushing hug. His horns pressed against Ranboo’s ribs. “You have to trust me,” he said softly, as Ranboo buried his face in his hair and sobbed. “I trust Technoblade. He’ll keep me safe.”

Ranboo looked up. Technoblade stared at them, expression grim yet mostly unreadable. “Don’t cry,” he said gruffly. “You’re burning yourself.”

Ranboo wiped his stinging cheeks. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Phil said. He gently pulled him from Tubbo’s arms. “I’ll bring you to Sapnap. You should have company. I won’t make you work with me for now.”

Tubbo nodded in agreement, eyes closing, and Ranboo allowed himself to be led away. *Gods, please.* Phil wrapped an arm around his shoulders and didn’t let go until they stood before the knights’ quarters. *I can’t sit here and do nothing.*

“I’ll handle telling the knights about all this,” Phil murmured to him. “You rest, mate.”

“Since when is Techno king?” Ranboo asked, barely above a whimper.

“Since a couple days ago. We were waiting for Tommy to come back to announce it,” Phil replied. “We weren’t expecting... this.”

“And he’ll keep Tubbo safe?”

Phil’s eyes fell closed. “He’ll try his hardest. That’s all I can promise you.”

Ranboo nodded. It was the truth — that didn’t make it hurt any less.

Phil left him there, standing before the knights’ quarters with his heart sat beating and bloody in his hands. He tapped on the door with his knuckle. The sound echoed in his ears.

I have to come up with something.

~

“How do you think they’ll want to kill me?”

What the hell kind of question is that? Techno turned a corner, Tubbo trotting at his heels. “I mean it,” Tubbo continued. “I want to know.”

“I have no idea,” Techno grumbled. “Now be quiet.”

They descended the long staircase into the basement. Techno prayed no servants had seen them. The air was cold against his arms, raising goosebumps. *Please still be in there.*

“Where are we going?” Tubbo said. His voice echoed off the stone walls.

“Shh!” Techno hissed. “Stay there.”

Tubbo paused where he stood, lips pursed in discomfort. *I wish I could give you more answers, kid.* Techno painstakingly pulled open one of the mausoleum’s massive doors. *But I can barely hear my own thoughts over how much I want to scream right now.*

Without the peace of solitude, Techno felt fear’s sharp claws climb up his back as he shimmied himself through the space in the doors and into the mausoleum. The air smelt of dead plants; Wilbur’s flowers had rotted, adorning his casket in muddled heaps of grey and brown. “Techno?” Tubbo called uncertainly.

“I’ll be out in a second; be quiet!” He replied. Heart thumping in his chest, Techno darted to Wilbur’s tomb and paused before it, hands hovering over the stone. *Fuck. Oh gods. I can’t do this.*

Terror was not a familiar feeling. Techno wanted to keep it that way.

He grasped one end of the lid of Wilbur’s tomb and pushed it away from him. Wilbur’s shiny dress shoes sparkled in the new light, untouched by dust. Without thinking, Techno gasped and held his breath. *If I smell him, I think I’ll crack. Let’s just get this over with.*

The totem stood where he’d left it, pressed between Wilbur’s shoes and the tomb’s wall. Techno snatched it, yanking the lid back over his brother’s grave with enough force to send him stumbling backwards. When he looked down at the totem in his hands, he realized he was trembling. *Thanks for keeping this safe*, he thought, but something sour had settled on his tongue that wouldn’t go away when he swallowed. He didn’t have time to figure out what it was.

When he emerged from the mausoleum and pushed the titanic door back into place, he found Tubbo in the exact position he'd left him in, face serious but seemingly devoid of fear. "What's that?" He asked quietly.

"Your chance at salvation." Techno slid off his belt and tossed it into Tubbo's hands. "Belt this thing to your chest."

"What?" Tubbo looked up at him and tilted his head. "I— what?"

"It's a totem of Undying," Techno said. "If they kill you, this can bring you back to life once. That might be enough of a chance to escape."

"Really?" Tubbo shrugged off his tunic, revealing a light undershirt. There were patches of discoloured flesh up his arms where the frostbite had never healed. "It'll keep me alive?"

"It'll bring you back to life if you're holding it at the moment of death." Techno knelt down and pressed the totem into Tubbo's sternum. "Keep it hidden. Don't even tell my dad. Nobody can know."

Tubbo wrapped the belt around him, securing the totem to his chest. "You think this'll help me live?"

"It's our only shot, man." Techno sat back on his heels. "The Eretians have put us in a pretty bad spot."

"Tell me about it," Tubbo chuckled. "At least I'll turn out like my dad if they kill me. It'll be honourable."

With the totem snug against his chest, Tubbo slipped his thick tunic back on and took a step towards the stairs. Techno stopped him with a hand on his wrist. "Listen to me," he said. "Don't get comfortable because you've got that thing on you. I want you to fight them with everything you've got. Make their lives hell. I don't want you giving up on me."

"If this is checkmate, then this is checkmate," Tubbo replied. To Techno's surprise, he smiled. "You guys focus on Tommy. I'll figure myself out."

He's either lost his mind or is the bravest kid I've ever met. Techno gave him a pat on the shoulder. *If he lives through this, he could be the greatest king to have ever lived.*

Phil had a single horse ready for them when they exited the castle doors. He didn't look Techno in the eyes as he led them to the nether portal, reins clutched in a white-knuckled hand. *I can't even say something to comfort him.* Techno ached to have his sword on him. *He knows I'd be lying.*

Tubbo seemed oddly alright to be on their way without any final goodbyes.

Chapter End Notes

ophie's pro-tip: be scared for Tubbo

a surprising amount of y'all thought I was leading to a ghostbur arc with Wilbur! Sadly, no. I was originally planning to revive him in the temple, but I thought it would be better story-wise if he died. Sorry to dash your hopes! There wasn't really a

satisfactory place for ghostbur :(

MAN things are coming close to the final stretch. I'm lowkey scared to write these chapters bc I have so many storylines to incorporate and characters to use. I want it to be as satisfying as possible for all you lovely people who've stuck around this long! You guys have made it all worth it. Also AYYYYY 1000 comments!!!! Give me more (threat)

can't wait to cause more pain!

-Ophelia

King Eret

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Someone was roaring beneath him.

No. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut. It had to be some *thing* — whatever it was, it couldn't be human. No human could roar like that.

Another bellowing howl rumbled the room's stone walls. Tommy pulled his knees to his chest, pressing his ear to the cold floor. His whole body ached. *Are you locked up like me, whatever you are? Did they capture you too?*

Tommy listened for more, but whatever beast screamed from the castle's depths had gone silent. A long moment passed, with Tommy drifting in and out of consciousness, and soon he wasn't sure if he'd really heard anything at all. *I hope not. I hate screaming.*

He couldn't find it in himself to chuckle at the irony of that statement.

The room he'd awoken in had no windows, only a small single bed against one of the walls under which Tommy had promptly squeezed himself. The door at the end of the room looked to be made of steel, too tough for Tommy to even consider trying to get out of. He'd grind the bones in his hands to dust before he even made a dent in it. The bed's frame was flimsy, the covers easily tearable. Even the chamber pot was too soft to be used as any sort of weapon.

The whole place stank of defeat.

A door somewhere clicked open with a heavy *cha-chunk*, then closed once more. Tommy felt his feathers bristle. The door of his room then unlocked, creaking open ever so slightly. "Don't get any ideas, kid," came a familiar voice. "I'm not afraid of you."

Her name tasted like rage. *Nikki. That bitch.* Tommy flattened himself even more against the floor. After a few moments, the door opened fully, allowing her and another person to step in. Tommy recognized her aged leather boots, but couldn't recognize the sleek, clean ones that followed in behind her.

He ended up not needing to — he knew their voice immediately.

"Is he under the bed?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Nikki answered politely. "I can get him out if you need."

"No bother," King Eret replied. They lowered themselves to their knees, ignoring Nikki's chirp of surprise, then bent their head close to the floor to lock eyes with Tommy. "There he is," he said warmly. A lock of curled brown hair fell over his eyes. "Come on out. You're not in danger."

Tommy made no move. *His eyes are white. He's got no fucking... eyeball balls, or whatever the fuck they're called. What the fuck?*

Eret smiled, showing lines of perfect white teeth. Though they couldn't have been older than Technoblade, something about the way they carried themselves made Tommy feel as though they'd been around for hundreds of years. "Come on, darling," Eret murmured. He stuck out a

well-manicured hand. “Out you go. That can’t be comfortable.”

Behind him, Nikki bent down too, meeting Tommy’s gaze with a tightened jaw and eyes blazing with poorly-hidden aggression. *Somehow, you’re scaring me less than King Eret is. At least I can tell how you feel*, Tommy thought, watching her jab a finger at him and mouth *get out!*. Reluctantly, he put his hand in Eret’s and allowed them to pull him from the floor and out into the open. Eret’s skin was cool. Tommy didn’t like that.

“Isn’t that better?” Eret raised the two of them to their feet, keeping his hands firmly upon Tommy’s shoulders. “Nether Almighty, aren’t you big! I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in person before.” They turned to Nikki, chuckling. “Hard to believe he’s not Phil’s real kid, right? They could be carbon copies.”

“I am my dad’s real kid!” Tommy snapped. “Fuck off!”

Eret snorted, bringing a hand up to rub at Tommy’s cheek. “Sure you are. Have you eaten? Do you want a snack?”

“Where the fuck are George and Dream?” Tommy batted away Eret’s hand. “You better not kill them. My dad will fuck you up—“

“They’re where they need to be,” King Eret relied smoothly. “But I’m talking about you. Can you answer my question?”

I hate you so much. Tommy scowled. “You don’t fucking scare—“

“Yes or no, Tommy.”

Tommy’s chest tightened. Eret’s smile dropped, retreating into a mask of stony coolness. “It’s a simple question,” he said. “Do I need to repeat it for you?”

“No,” Tommy growled. “I didn’t eat and I don’t want to. I’m not eating anything you give me.”

That was a lie. He was so hungry that his muscles felt like they were full of angry ants. Moving too much made his stomach warble like a dying animal. He was a prince, alright? Hunger wasn’t a familiar feeling.

“Hm.” Eret closed their eyes and chuckled. “You are a spark and a half. It’s adorable.”

Tommy’s hands itched to tear clumps of curls straight from the king’s stupid head. He bit down on his tongue and turned away, climbing onto his bed with his knees tucked to his chest. Eret made no move to follow him, but he could tell their eyes never left the back of his head. *Someone save me*, Tommy begged internally, pressing his forehead to the stone wall. *I don’t want to die in here. I don’t want to die at all.*

As it turns out, King Eret could read thoughts. “We’re not going to kill you, Tommy. We actually want to send you home.”

Don’t believe them. Tommy clapped his hands over his ears. *They’re lying. They’re big stinking liars.*

Two hands closed over his own and yanked them off the sides of his head. “I mean it,” Eret said, far too close to Tommy’s ear. “I fully intend to send you home. If your dad listens to the conditions we’ve set out, then you’ll go home all in one piece.”

Tommy gulped. *I don't even want to know what the other option is.* "What conditions?" He whispered.

Eret unclipped the deep purple cape around his neck and sat down at the edge of Tommy's bed. "Well," he said, folding the cape in his lap. "As much as we love having you here, you're not much use to us as a prince. We kill you, and the best we get is a big old angry dad on our doorstep shaking his fist." Eret raised his fist and shook it, curling his lip humorously. "What we need are kings. Or... future kings. Get what I'm say—"

Tommy's hands were around his neck before he could even blink. "Die!" He screamed. His nails sunk into Eret's flesh and squeezed. "Don't you fucking *dare* touch Tubbo, you fucking—"

Nikki descended upon him in a blur of darkness and wrenched him off Eret's chest. Her hands clapped over his mouth and nose and pressed down, cutting off his air as he was forced to kneel between her feet. "Nikki! Enough!" King Eret shouted. "I'm fine."

Nikki released Tommy with a grunt and he fell to the floor, gasping for air. His facial scabs screamed with pain and he could feel wetness running down the side of his cheek. "Don't try that shit again," she hissed. "I don't have the patience to deal with you."

"Nikki, you're scaring him," Eret said with a frown. "Go stand outside. I'll knock when I want you to come in and unlock the inner door."

Nikki scowled, but she slunk out without complaint. *Maybe she's glad to be away from me.* The thought gave Tommy the barest spark of satisfaction. *Good. Bye, bitch. Be bothered.*

However, his good mood faded when he realized he was now alone with King Eret, possibly the most evil bastard to ever exist in the world, with no way to escape or fight back. A chill slithered up Tommy's spine and he found himself crawling backwards until his back hit the wall. "I'll kill you if you touch Tubbo," he said. "He's my best friend. You can't kill him."

Eret tutted. "It's a real shame. This has to happen."

"No it doesn't!" Tommy cried. "You can just take Manburg if you want it so damn badly! Why kill my friend if he's not even king yet?"

"Maybe it's hard to understand, given how you're..." Eret gestured vaguely. "Not your father's *actual* kid, but properly ending bloodlines is quite important in royal life. I can't leave the Manburg heir alive if I want his territory to be mine, just like I can't leave King George alive either. They've got to die."

Their casual tone made Tommy want to vomit. "You're awful," he whimpered. "I hate you so much."

"Oh, come on." Eret scooted closer. If Tommy squinted, maybe he could pretend they were Wilbur. They had similar hair. "This'll all make sense when you grow up, little man. You—"

"Don't call me that!" Tommy screamed.

"Snarky." Eret raised his hands defensively. "That'd hinder you, if you ever became king. Hot-headedness gets you in trouble with the big guys."

"I'm never going to become king." Tommy buried his face in his knees. "I could never."

"My dad said the same thing to me, you know. Now look at me." Eret flicked the sharp-pronged

crown atop their head. “Sometimes the best thing you can do is prove those parents of yours wrong.”

“I don’t want to be king. Technoblade can be king. He’s better at all that shit, anyway.”

“I’d have more faith in yourself. You remind me of me — full of drive. Of fire.” Eret grabbed Tommy’s knee and squeezed. “Like a big, swirling hurricane. A real force of nature.”

Hurricane Tommy. Tommy couldn’t remember who’d made up that nickname for him, all those years ago. Probably his father, or Wilbur, perhaps. Maybe even Dream. No matter who had created it, it always meant the same thing — he was too much to handle. A force of destruction. Something inherently made wrong.

Tommy’s stomach hurt. Maybe he did need something to eat.

“Well,” Eret said, rising to their feet. “I won’t keep you in here to your boredom anymore. You’re coming with me.”

Tommy’s mouth went dry. “Why?”

“I have a job for you.” Eret rapped on the door with his fingers. “It’s very easy, don’t worry.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Tommy hissed. Nikki swung open the door, scowling. “I’m not going with you.”

“Hm.” Eret quirked his lip. He motioned Nikki inside. “It’s not a request, buddy. You’re coming whether you like it or not.”

“I’m not!” He kicked at Nikki’s hands as she neared. “I’m not! You can’t make me!”

“Blindfold him,” said Eret. “I don’t want him knowing his way around here.”

Nikki fished a piece of cloth from her pocket. “Yes, your Highness,” she muttered, grabbing Tommy by the ankle and yanking him towards her. Thought she couldn’t have been taller than Tommy by more than a couple inches, she pinned him down with ease and forced the cloth over his eyes. “If you value that little friend of yours,” she said, grunting as Tommy’s knee collided with her sternum. “Then you’ll stop this shit right now and do what we tell you to do.”

Tubbo. Oh gods, Tubbo! Tommy went still, gritting his teeth until his jaw ached. Nikki pulled off of him, pressing his back to her chest with his arms crossed across him. “I mean it.” She squeezed his wrists until they stung. “Misbehave, and I’ll make him pay. Got it?”

Tommy nodded. Eret hummed, satisfied. “Come on, then,” Nikki said. “Let’s bring you upstairs.”

They walked for several minutes, up a long staircase and through so many twisting halls that Tommy eventually forgot how many lefts and rights they’d taken. When the blindfold was finally slipped off his eyes, he was surprised to find himself in another windowless room. A small plate of food sat on the table in the corner, plain yet mouth-watering to Tommy’s aching stomach. He moved to grab a pastry, only to be stopped by a cold hand on his shoulder. “Nuh-uh,” Eret chided in a grating falsetto. “Not until you do a little work first.”

Tommy gulped. “Which is?”

“It’s very easy.” Eret strode past him, dragging their finger along the plate’s silver edge. “I just want you to scream.”

“Scream?” Tommy paused. “Why?”

“That’s not important. I just need you to scream. The more you scream, the more food Nikki will allow you.” Eret plucked a pastry from the plate and took a sizeable bite. “Easy deal. It’ll probably be nice to get out some of all that aggression you’ve got.”

Tommy’s stomach twisted painfully, but he forced himself to ignore it. *It’s probably poison or something. They’re tricking you.* “And what if I say fuck you and your pastries, huh? What then? I can go hungry.”

Eret barked a laugh. “It’s your prerogative, kid. No skin off my ass.”

He threw the half-eaten pastry at Tommy’s feet, and his gentle smile dropped. “Nikki already spelled this out for you — If you don’t scream, I’ll make your friend do it. And I don’t like him as much as I like you.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Tommy cried. *They’ve got Tubbo! He’s here!*

“I would!” Eret bared their teeth. “Watch me!”

“Know where your bread is buttered, brat,” Nikki whispered in his ear. “King Eret holds their promises.”

Tommy growled through gritted teeth. “Fine. But I’m doing this for Tubbo, not you guys.”

Eret smiled, narrowing their eyes into white slits. “What an altruist. So much like that man who took you in.”

“He’s my *dad* !” A hand on the back of his arm stopped him in his tracks as he went to step forward. “Fuck you!”

Eret sighed, chuckling with his tongue between his teeth. “Nikki, I have other things to attend to. You know what I want from him.”

Tommy felt her nails sink into the muscle of his bicep. “Yes, your Highness,” she said politely.

“You’re not to touch him. If he’s giving us what we want, you’re to feed him.”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“Excellent.” Eret clapped. “You give it your all, kid. There are more sour berry tarts where that came from. Hannah told me they were your favourite.”

Tommy watched him leave, rage prickling beneath his skin like ants. Once the heavy door had finally closed and locked behind him, Nikki spoke. “Well, come on then. Show me what you got.”

Her tone made his spine tingle, but he was too hungry to care.

This better be worth it for Tubbo.

~

“What the fuck are you *doing* to him?”

Another grating scream hit George’s ears and he winced instinctively, screwing his eyes shut. Eret let out a barking laugh. “I’m not telling you. You’re smart. You can infer.”

“He’s a kid!” George cried. “He’s just a prince! He’s useless to you!”

“What do you mean?” Eret’s echoing footsteps neared until they were mere inches from the cheek George had pressed to the wall. Tommy’s screaming continued in the background, unending.

“He’s being perfectly useful. Real good kid, he is.”

“Fuck you.” George’s wrists stung. He shifted, yanking them into his lap. The cuffs were so tight he could barely feel his fingers. “Haven’t you any mercy?”

A deep, satisfied chuckle rumbled in Eret’s throat. “Of course I do. That’s what makes this so gratifying.”

Dad, help me. I don’t want to die here. Not to him. George bit down on his lips. He felt the tip of a boot tap his knee, but didn’t open his eyes. “Aren’t you going to ask about Dream? Don’t you miss him?” Eret said.

No. I don’t even want to know what you’re doing to him. George forced down the lump rising in his throat and said nothing. *I’m sorry, Dream. This is what you get for loving me.*

“I was told they found you in bed together. Enjoying the perks of indentured servitude?” Eret’s voice went sharp. He kicked George’s knee again, harder. “Like having someone born and raised to love your every move?”

“It’s not like that,” George said. “He’s not my knight anymore. He’s a free man.”

“A free man?” Eret cackled. “Sure. He’ll certainly be free once you’re out of the picture. He’s got too much talent to be wasted on the likes of you.”

“Don’t lay a fucking hand on him, Eret. He won’t join your side — not after what you want to do to Prince Tubbo.”

Tommy screamed again, high and loud and wordless. George’s breath caught in his throat. “King Phil will raze your kingdom to ashes if you hurt that boy. He’s already lost enough because of you.”

Eret scoffed and walked away. “I don’t care about that child. If his dear old daddy behaves, he’ll go home in one piece. All I want is the Manburg heir.”

“He’s a *child*, Eret!”

“He’s a threat in the making!” Eret stamped his foot on the ground. The sound echoed in George’s ears. “You of all people should understand that! Haven’t you got a brain on those little shoulders of yours, George?” He hissed. “Or have you grown so soft that you’ve forgotten that kings can *never* truly be friends?”

“Not all of us are like you,” George said. “We care for each other. We’ll stick up for one another.”

“That kind of bullshit is why I currently hold control of three kingdoms. I care for myself, my people — *no one else*. I don’t have the time to play nursemaid for other countries when they can’t fight their own battles.” Eret spat on the ground. “You all disgust me. I’ll be happy to take over your pathetic kingdoms.”

The door to the room opened, and in walked Hannah, bringing with her a wave of sudden rage that filled George’s bones with ire. *You*, he thought, watching her scurry to Eret’s side and whisper something in his ear. When she pulled back, twiddling her fingers, she looked almost bashful. Eret

pursed his lips, flicked his eyes between her and George, then beckoned her close again to whisper something back. Whatever he said made several of the flowers framing Hannah's face lift as she smiled. Once she'd hurried out again, Eret turned back to George. "Soft," he muttered. "I've got to go. I've been asked a favour."

"Can I give you a piece of advice before you go?" George coughed. His body felt cold, heavy. *I want to go home.*

Eret breathed a laugh. "Fire away."

"Don't go near the portal."

Silence fell over them, and for the first time since he'd been dragged in there and locked up, George felt a fleeting moment of satisfaction. "I know it's got lots of shiny resources that you'd love to get your grubby little hands on, but stick to what the experts export out. There's a reason why most of the portals were destroyed."

"Hm," Eret murmured. "I reckon I'll do what I want when you're dead and buried. Thanks, though."

He left, and something rumbled in the depths below them. It sounded like a cry.

Tommy's screaming had stopped.

~

Like many things, worry didn't come naturally to Technoblade. If he didn't like an emotion, he tossed it aside, pushing it to the end of his proverbial shelf until it withered away and joined the list of foreign feelings. If there was worry to be felt, Wilbur would feel it for him. That's how it had always been. He didn't remember the time before his father, nor did he really want to, but he assumed he had been the same way back then too.

But now Wilbur was gone, and in all the time they'd been riding — a near twelve hours — Tubbo hadn't said a single word to him. In mere minutes, they'd enter Eretian territory, alone and unarmed, unable to defend themselves. And Tubbo just looked... calm. That made something niggle at Techno's chest. Perhaps it was maturity. Perhaps it was respect for a fellow future king.

Or perhaps it was just that — worry. Worry for the tiny kid pressed up against his chest, trotting towards his imminent death with any fear he felt pushed below the surface of his stony eyes and pursed lips. Worry for the stupid little brother he'd conditioned himself to ignore his whole life, locked up beneath a white-eyed monster's grip with nobody to protect him.

Worry that Techno had no way of stopping what lay ahead.

"How are you feeling?"

Tubbo made a small grunt. "I don't speak Piglin," Techno tried to say humorously. "Can you translate?"

Tubbo's head whipped to the side as if he'd heard something. Techno looked too, but found nothing out of the ordinary in the red forest that passed around them. "Yeah," Tubbo said. "I'm fine."

"I know this looks bad, but my dad's gotten out of some really sticky situations in his youth. Plus, you've got me."

“And the totem,” Tubbo added. “You sure it’ll work?”

“Hundred percent. If your heart stops with that thing in your hand, you’ll be back to life before you can even blink.”

“Okay.” Tubbo looked ahead again. “It’s cool that you’re king now. Why did Phil retire?”

“To focus on being a dad. Said he couldn’t do both, so he chose me and Tommy. Tommy, mostly. I don’t need much parenting nowadays.”

“What would a king do if they were in my situation?” Tubbo said. “What would you do?”

I don’t know. That’s what scares me. “Uh, I mean, try to survive, I guess. Make negotiations if you can. Can’t see the Eretians being willing to negotiate much, though. You could also try to fight them hand-to-hand, but...” Techno trailed off. Apparently giving advice *also* did not come naturally to him.

Tubbo chuckled, but the sound was empty. “Assuming all those fool-proof plans fail, what do I do then? What’s a kingly way to die?”

“Blaze of glory. Give ‘em hell. Take as many of them down as you can with you.”

Perhaps it wasn’t the *total* truth. A kingly death, in his father’s words, was supposed to be ‘noble, fearless, and without too much attention drawn to oneself’. Techno, however, found that to be stunningly boring, and he felt Tubbo would probably think the same thing. *If the kid’s going to die, at least let him have a bit of fun with it. The Eretians will certainly deserve it.*

“Hm. Okay.” Tubbo nodded thoughtfully, as though Techno had bestowed onto him a piece of philosophical genius. “Thank you.”

They crested a hill. Two guards waited for them there. “Where’s the king?” Said one of them.

“I am the king,” Techno replied. “Have been for a while.”

The other one laughed. “What a coward. Sending in his son to face us because he can’t.”

“Oh, I begged him to come. Had to trade all my allowance in.” Techno enjoyed the way their satisfied smiles twisted into frowns. “So you’re stuck with me.”

“Whatever. You’re coming with us.” The two of them raised crossbows, and Techno felt Tubbo flinch against him. “I hereby declare you official prisoners of the state.”

“Whoopee.” Techno put his arm around Tubbo’s stomach, pressing the totem into his chest. *Into fire we go.*

The familiar sound of an enderman teleporting buzzed nearby. *Endermen? In a red forest?* He thought, watching the Eretian soldiers take hold of his horse’s reins. *That’s a first.*

Tubbo didn’t seem to notice. If he did, he didn’t show it. The outline of the totem was a grounding weight between them.

Time to be a king.

just realized niki nihachu spells her name as niki not Nikki, dont hmu

THEYRE HEEEEEEEEERE! finally, king Eret makes an appearance. I hate em but I love em. Lots of sexy sexy psychological warfare because Eret craves the feeling of causing fear and pain through deception

(Nikki can and will torture people tho just for fun)

sorry this took so long! I am having some kidney pains so I got my blood taken yesterday and almost fainted hsjdhdkf

if you like this story, make sure to leave comments and recommend it to people! I thrive off of feedback and interaction with people, so never ever feel shy leaving comments lol I adore them sm

dnf gets no rights this chapter bc of the tweets Dream put out today sorry keep your degeneracy off of Twitter thanks

-Ophelia

Rescue Mission (The Last One, Hopefully)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Oh my — fuck, *stop* . I think I’m going to puke.”

Ranboo loosened his hold around Sapnap’s waist and let him collapse to his knees, groaning. “Sorry!” He squeaked. “You know this is all new to me!”

Learning how to teleport with another person had been a feat, unsurprisingly. Though both Tommy and Tubbo had begged him multiple times over the years to zap them across a room or down a flight of stairs, Ranboo had always staunchly denied. Messing with his teleportation, which was difficult by himself at best, seemed the perfect way to accidentally slice one of his best friends in half and end up with a regicide charge on his hands all at once. “*Absolutely not*,” he remembered tutting to an irritated Tubbo after refusing to teleport him onto the roof Tommy had flown up onto during his latest tantrum. “*Nothing could ever, ever make me risk that.*”

As it turns out, desperation and he and Sapnap’s shared eagerness to save their friends could, in fact, make him risk that.

“Just give me a second, kid.” Sapnap whacked at Ranboo’s ankle. “I feel like my stomach has been scrambled.”

“If I kill you, Dream’s going to murder me,” Ranboo whined. “He’s already almost done it, like, twice. And that means Tommy will have to kill Dream, because we pinky-promised that—”

“Don’t worry,” Sapnap replied through a burp. “I put it in my will that if I’m killed by a half-enderman minor with an anxiety issue, nobody is allowed to avenge me. You’re safe.”

Ranboo cocked his head. “Huh?”

“It’s a joke,” Sapnap groaned.

Maybe I’ll be the one to puke. “No more jokes! I’m too nervous for jokes!” Ranboo buried his face in his hands. “Just look at the map and figure out where to go next, please.”

“Aether Almighty, give me a moment.” Sapnap pulled their crumpled map from his pocket and pointed at a small x they’d sketched while planning. “There’ll probably be guards all around the castle, so I say we stick to the forest and try to get in through one of the towers. If I can snatch someone’s set of armour, we’ll be set.”

“What about me?” Ranboo motioned to the bi-colour halves of his face. “I’m kind of recognizable. There aren’t too many half-enderman kids around.”

“You’ll just have to stay close and hope we aren’t seen. I’ll need you to zap me away if someone catches us.”

Ranboo’s heart slid up into his throat, beating quick enough to make him sick. His cheeks stung from the many tears he’d shed watching Tubbo and Technoblade be taken prisoner and led into Eretian territory, unarmed and unarmored. In his despair, he’d become sloppy with his teleporting, almost getting them caught several times over. *Keep it together, Ranboo*, he thought to himself, gulping. *They’re both counting on you. You have to bring them both back home.*

Sapnap cocked his finger. “Come on, I see the castle. Stick with me.”

The outlines of the many knives tucked into his leather vest filled Ranboo with equal parts fear, gladness, and comfort. Sapnap was like Dream — a knight, a protector, someone who actually had a decent shot at keeping the two of them safe. He’d kept them safe on their travels, scaring away piglins without even a sound, then gotten them through the town’s portal without anyone sparing them a second glance. Ranboo himself? A snivelling deadweight. At least he could teleport. Sometimes.

Ranboo darted up to Sapnap’s side as he peered around one of the massive willow trees surrounding the Eretian castle. The property was *massive*, teeming with brightly-coloured flora and all manner of castle folk going about their daily routines. No blood-covered executioners walked the many paths, thankfully, but Ranboo did catch eye of a satyr woman walking arm in arm with a pink-haired woman in full netherite armour, their faces rife with satisfaction. Though neither women were familiar, they sent a chill down Ranboo’s spine.

“Fuck,” Sapnap hissed. “It’s packed. Ranboo, how far can you teleport? Is there any way you could get us inside the castle from here?”

“Not a chance! I can barely go fifteen feet!” Ranboo bit his cheek. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Sapnap waved his hand, frowning. “Dream’s going to have my ass roasted on a plate when he finds out I brought a twelve-year-old along anyway. Stick close to me and keep your leathers on, even if they’re uncomfortable. They’ll stop an arrow or two from slicing through you.”

Ranboo fiddled with the neckline of his leather chestplate. It was too short for his torso, too wide in the arms and waist. “Okay. I promise I’ll be useful.”

“You already are, kid. Don’t worry about that.” Sapnap peered around the tree’s other side. “Alright, there’s a stable over there that looks empty. Can you get us in there?”

Ranboo grabbed ahold of Sapnap’s shoulders. “I should,” he said, feeling nervousness climb up the back of his neck. “Don’t puke, please.”

He closed his eyes and felt the familiar jolt of teleportation rip his feet from the ground. They landed on mush, then the familiar smell of hay and animal waste filled his nose. Sapnap exhaled loudly. “That one wasn’t too bad. You’re getting better at this.”

“Woohoo!” Ranboo whispered excitedly. “Do you think I could ever be a knight?”

“Dude, you can fucking *read*. That puts you above half of the trainees already.” Sapnap bent behind a barrel as an Eretian soldier walked by, motioning for Ranboo to follow with him. “If we save Dream today, he may be more inclined to give you some private lessons. I’ll bring it up with him.”

“Cool,” Ranboo said. “I want to be able to protect Tommy and Tubbo, especially if Tubbo becomes king.”

Sapnap pointed to a nearby alcove overgrown with weeds, and Ranboo teleported them there in the blink of an eye. “Aren’t you noble,” He whispered, bending the two of them low to the ground. “I became a knight to get three meals a day and that’s it. Turns out King George isn’t actually too bad. Dream *really* likes him.” He paused. “Repeat that to anyone and I’ll kick your knobbly knees in.”

“He *like* likes him?” Ranboo pressed. The curiosity was a nice break from the fear roiling in his

stomach.

“Fuck—“ Sapnap wiped at his face with the back of his palm— “Okay, yeah, I think. And I think George knows, and my friend says George is definitely into him back, but Dream won’t say a thing and I can’t ask until we get him out of this damn place. I think I’ll kill him if he dies before I can force more info out of him.”

“Wow,” Ranboo said, spellbound. “That’s so—“

“Is someone there?” An unfamiliar voice cried. Sapnap clapped a hand over his mouth, gesturing wildly. *There’s nowhere to go!* Ranboo thought with a jolt. Without thinking, he grabbed Sapnap by the waist and pressed his face into the back of his shoulder blades. *Anywhere but here. Somewhere safe. Somewhere low.*

They teleported; their feet hit concrete and tripped, sending them both clattering to the ground. For a moment, Ranboo saw only darkness. “Sap—“ he began, but stopped abruptly when his eyes adjusted to the sudden lack of light.

They were... inside. Somewhere. It looked to be a basement of sorts, dim and dank with barrels and other miscellaneous items lining the stone brick walls. Sapnap struggled to his feet, wiping mildew off his knees. “Where the fuck are we?” He whispered.

“A basement?” Ranboo replied. A sudden wave of exhaustion made his head spin. “I swear I didn’t mean to. I freaked out and didn’t really know where I was teleporting. I didn’t even know this was *here*.”

“You saved our asses! It’s fine!” Sapnap looked around, wide-eyed. “Do you think this is under the castle?”

“No clue! I barely know what a castle basement looks like.” Ranboo shivered. The air was thick and clammy. “I don’t like damp places.”

“Let’s keep moving, then. Our asses are saved for the moment.”

Luckily, the basement’s thin, winding halls seemed to be empty. They heard no noise, apart from the pattering of footsteps above them and the unnerving rumbling of something below their feet, and many of the rooms they explored looked to have been uninhabited for some time. From one of them, Sapnap victoriously emerged with several glass bottles of ‘this fucking shit’ in his arms. “If I throw this down,” he said, swishing the purple liquid before Ranboo’s eyes, “You zap us away immediately. This can fuck someone up real nice.”

The liquid looked strangely familiar, but Ranboo didn’t bother asking what it was. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

At the end of one hall sat a thick iron door sporting a small window to look through. Sapnap peered through it, still clutching a glass bottle between his fingers, then motioned for Ranboo to come closer. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone through there. Be ready to teleport us back if needed, though.”

Ranboo nodded, wrapping an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders. *Be ready. Be ready. I can do that.*

Hearing the clear ring of voices just around the corner as they teleported in still scared him enough to nearly crap his pants.

Sapnap flattened them both to the wall with a strong hand against Ranboo’s chest. *Fuck!* Ranboo

thought. The voices were near enough to hear the gentle scuff of their feet against the stone floor. “And, in exchange for the promise of good behaviour,” one of the voices said in a cool, polite tone, “I’d be willing to let you have one final conversation. Supervised, of course, but healing nonetheless.”

Sapnap’s hand moved to Ranboo’s wrist and squeezed until it hurt. *King Eret!* He mouthed, wide-eyed. When another, more familiar voice answered with an, “Okay,” dripping with defeat, horror consumed his features like a wildfire.

It was Dream.

Without thinking, Ranboo poked his head around the corner. Small cells lined either wall, and another steel door sat at the other end of the hall. At the far end, a cloaked figure Ranboo assumed was King Eret and a woman with flowers in her hair stood before someone crouched in one of the cells. “Get up, then,” said King Eret, flicking his hand up. “And don’t try anything.”

It was then that Ranboo realized that he’d never actually seen Dream’s face before. Aether Almighty, he’d barely ever seen the man without his armour and axes. But there he stood, defenceless, oddly small in his tunic and pants as he rose to his feet. He looked... younger than Ranboo had expected, slight and somewhat lanky. Scores of long-healed scars criss-crossed up his face and neck, staunchly white against his already-pale skin.

What was truly startling about him was the despair in his eyes, the hopelessness that weighed upon his shoulders as the woman beside King Eret unlocked his cell and clasped a pair of handcuffs around his wrists. “I think you’ll find that this is for the best,” King Eret said, resting a hand on Dream’s back as he was led out. “I implore you to consider your options here with us too. You’ve got talent.”

Dream didn’t reply, though he did visibly flinch when King Eret took hold of his handcuffs. “Don’t let him be the end of you, Dream,” King Eret murmured. “Keep my offer in mind.”

Once the steel door had closed behind them, Sapnap let out a shuddering breath. “He’s alive,” he said. “Thank fuck. He’s still alive.”

“So is George, I think,” Ranboo said. “They’re bringing them up to talk with each other.”

“That probably means they’re going to murder him within the hour. I’d bet money on them having Tubbo too.” Sapnap grabbed Ranboo’s arm and pointed at the steel door they’d come through. “We need more weapons, now . I’m not letting any of our idiots die.”

Ranboo teleported them back into the hall and Sapnap took off in a sprint, disappearing down one of the forked halls. “Look for gas masks! We’ll need them!”

Tubbo and Tommy are in here. They’re in this castle somewhere. Ranboo’s heart rattled in his chest as he ran through the basement, bursting through room after room. Canned foods, building material, ancient dusty cannons — no armour, no weapons. The fact that Sapnap wanted gas masks only filled Ranboo with more fear than before. *I have to save them. Dream and King George, too. I don’t want any of them to die.*

Ranboo descended a small, curving staircase, wincing as the metal steps whined beneath his feet, and darted down a particularly dim hall. He couldn’t hear Sapnap’s footsteps anymore. *This place is creepy. I don’t like it here.* A line of barrels and boxes against the near wall caught his eye, and he was happy to find several gas masks poking out of a fabric-lined bag. “Sapnap?” He said, too afraid to cry it any louder. There came no answer. He slid one mask over his face (thankfully, it fit

over his blasted ears) and hooked as many more as he could fit into the loops of his belt. The one on his face smelt of beer. *Ew.*

A sudden sound from behind him spooked him into teleporting half-way back up the staircase. Heart in his throat, Ranboo grasped the metal railing and peered back down into the darkness, squinting to find the cause of the noise. “Sapnap?” He whispered, but again found no reply. He took a couple tentative hops back down the stairs and pressed himself to the wall, searching for any signs of movement in the dimness. Once a couple moments had passed without any signs of life, Ranboo skittered back to his place by the gas masks and pulled open another barrel. *More masks?* He thought curiously. *This must be where they store them. There’s so many.*

Another sound rumbled from behind him, but Ranboo managed to hold himself together long enough to whirl around with a mask raised above his head as a makeshift weapon. “Who’s there?” He cried. Unlike the times before, he did actually receive an answer — a small whine, coming from a heavily-padlocked door hidden from the torchlight at the end of the hall. It was larger than any of the doors Ranboo had even seen within the castle, fortified with three slats of iron that barely moved when he tried to lift one of them from its places. “Hello?” He whispered, feeling the burn of curiosity sear his stomach as whatever lay on the other side of the door whined once more. It was certainly an animal.

Ranboo looked around again. Sapnap was nowhere to be seen or heard.

It’s only an animal. How bad could it be?

Really bad, in fact. Really bad.

The room he teleported into was lightless, damp, and stank of rot. Ranboo fell to his knees immediately, clapping his hands over the mouth of his mask as if to block the awful stench. His eyes rapidly adjusted to the darkness, but the sight that lay before him was one he’d have rather remained blind to.

It was a dragon. An adolescent one, given the size. About as wide and large as Tommy’s four-poster bed, it was curled up against the far wall of the small room with its emaciated tail curled around itself protectively. Two titanic steel chains kept it nailed to either wall by the throat and one of its legs. The fragments of a shattered egg lay in one corner. Broken glass covered the floor in a thin, dangerous carpet.

Oh, gods. Ranboo’s body went numb. *What happened here? What did they do to you?*

The dragon lifted its head and stared at him with cloudy eyes. Its black scales were dull, bleeding, flaking off in great big patches. The fleshy membrane of its wings was ripped in several places. It opened its mouth, drawing back its lips in a demented grin, and showed off its many missing teeth.

You’re like me, a deep part of him thrummed. *You’re a friend. You’re from home.*

Unsure if he was breathing at all, Ranboo extended a hand. The dragon clattered its teeth, hissing, and rose up onto his haunches. “Oh!” Ranboo whispered. He pulled off the gas mask. “Look! I’m an enderman! I’m like you!”

Seeing his face (and, more likely, his mix-matched eyes) made the dragon pause. Ranboo took the chance to take another step forward. “Oh,” he cooed. “I think you’re a baby. I think you’re just little.”

The dragon blinked up at him, mouth hung open, but it didn’t shy away as Ranboo placed a gentle

hand on its cheek. Scales came off beneath his fingers. “What have these guys done to you?”

The image of the many bottles of purple liquid hanging from Sapnap’s belt flashed in his mind’s eye. *Dragon’s Breath. I’ve got to tell the others. If the Eretians get ahold of too much of this stuff...*

The distant sound of Sapnap’s call made the dragon’s ears perk. “I’m coming back for you, little guy,” Ranboo said encouragingly. “I’m going to call you Michael. Once I get my friends safe, I’ll get you out of here. Enderman’s promise.”

Though it did pain him to teleport away, leaving behind the dragon’s distant whines, Ranboo’s thoughts were soon diverted. Sapnap practically barrelled into him, terror etched into his face. “You got masks!” He shrieked, yanking one over his mouth. “Come on! You have to teleport me up there!”

“Huh? What?” Ranboo’s head was spinning. Sapnap grabbed him by the arm and dragged him up the stairs. “What happened?”

“They’re all in the throne room together. I saw them,” Sapnap panted. “Go! Teleport us upstairs! This is our chance!”

Now? Already? All of them? Ranboo teleported them back into the jail room, his frazzled mind a whirlwind of fear and adrenaline. “Sapnap, I can’t— we could get us all killed—“

“They’ll die anyway if we don’t do anything.” Sapnap put his hands on either side of Ranboo’s head. “I’ll tell you where to go once we get up there. You’re going to zap me in there, I’ll blind as many of the guards as I can with these—“ he pointed to the potions on his belt—“And then we run like hell. You got it?”

“I don’t know—“ Tears began to brim in Ranboo’s eyes. The pain sent his heart into overdrive. “I can’t let anyone die—“

“Together, Ranboo. We’re going to do this together. For our friends.”

For my friends. Ranboo forced himself to take a deep breath. *For my friends and that poor little dragon they’ve got locked up. I’m doing this for them.*

He swallowed his tears, grabbed Sapnap’s shoulders, and squeezed.

“Fine. Let’s do this.”

~

In some messed up way, it was comforting to have all his friends in one place again.

In other, more rational ways, it most certainly was *not*.

“I really do plan on making this quick,” King Eret said. “I just feel bad making the lovers rush.”

He let out a cold, barking laugh, whacking the arms of his ornate throne with his palms. Before him, flanked by a guard on either side, Dream and George sat on their knees, heads bent low together, speaking in voices too quiet for Tommy to hear. A sort of defeated calmness hung heavy from the two of them, unshaken by King Eret’s laughter. Tommy wanted to slap both of them. *Do something! You can save us!* He looked to his brother, sat in a small chair surrounded by three more guards, and wanted to scream. *Techno, save us! Do something! Save Tubbo!*

He held his scorching tongue; anger wouldn't do him any good. Tubbo sat on his knees before Eret's throne as well, facing away, still as a statue. Tommy wanted to cry out to him, to run forward and wrap his friend in his arms and never, ever let go. *Are you afraid? Do you still have hope we can survive this?*

"*King Technoblade*," Eret said with a smirk. "Pleasure having done trading with you. I'm sure you'll be happy to bring your brother home safe and sound."

Techno's stone mask of solemnity did not flinch. "Yeah," he grunted. His wings rustled slightly, hitting the guards on either side of him. They scowled, fingering the strings of their loaded crossbows.

He brought Tubbo here to die. Tommy screwed his eyes shut. *I'll never forgive him. Never ever.*

"Oh, cheer up, kid. You're going home!" King Eret cried. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

Tommy shifted on his knees, feeling the burn of the carpet against his bare skin. "I want my friends, you prick!" He said. His half-healed scabs pulled with the movement of his lips. They were itchy and painful all at once.

Tubbo didn't turn his head at the sound of Tommy's voice, but he did slouch slightly forward, curling inwards by the shoulders. *Why aren't you fighting?* Tommy thought desperately. *Why isn't anyone doing anything?*

His eyes travelled back to Dream and George, them having lapsed into dead-eyed silence. "You're done?" Eret said. "That was quick. You two must have less to say to one another than I thought."

George sat back on his heels, mouth set into a tight line. "We're done," he repeated. Though it had only been a couple days at most since Tommy had last seen him, he looked to have grown older several years. Tommy had seen that happen with him once before, in the days after his father had died. Hopelessness aged him like nothing else.

King Eret smiled toothlessly. "Great, let's proceed."

They stood, smoothing the fabric of their ornate clothing. "Now, Technoblade, I will have to ask you and Tommy to remain in here until I'm done. For safety reasons, you see." Their eyes narrowed into spite-filled white slits. "And a bit of personal enjoyment."

"I want to go first!" Tubbo yelled. "Execute me first!"

"*No!*" Tommy screamed on instinct. He threw himself forward, landing on his stomach. Without the use of his wings or hands, he could do no more than wriggle. The white-haired satyr woman grabbed him by the hair and pulled him back. "Shut up! Stop talking!"

Eret balked, then burst into delighted laughter. "Aren't you a noble little sacrificial lamb! Trying to give dear King George a couple moments more with his knight?"

"Execute me first, coward!" Tubbo spat on the ground in front of him. What the fuck is he doing? "Come on! Do it! You won't because you're a bitch!"

"Tubbo, stop!" Tommy cried desperately. He felt a hand descend over his mouth and wrench his jaw shut. *I don't want to watch him die! I can't watch him die!*

"You're entertaining," Eret said. They glided down the couple steps to Tubbo's place on the floor, looking down at him over the bridge of their shapely nose. "I'd almost be sad to deny myself any

more of this spectacle.”

“Bullshit.” Tubbo wrenched himself forward in a weak attempt to headbutt Eret’s calves. “My dad always said you were a piss-poor replacement of your dad. You’re too much of a try-hard. You flaunt your shit because you know you’ll never be able to command as much fear as he did.”

Eret’s expression abruptly changed. “Shut it,” he hissed, bringing his foot down hard against one of Tubbo’s horns. “I’m far better than what your old man was left with. You’ve been living on borrowed time since the moment he wasn’t there to protect you anymore.”

“Did I strike a nerve, King Eret?” Tubbo said mockingly. *He’s genuinely lost his mind!* “Don’t like me talking about your dear old dad?”

“I’m not dealing with this shit anymore.” Eret shooed Nikki from the room with a brisk snap of their fingers. “You got what you asked for, kid. If I could, I’d make your little friend do it.” They looked up, meeting Tommy’s eye. “I guess it’ll suffice just to make him watch.”

Nikki returned, holding a familiar axe over her shoulder. Dream made a strangled gasping noise and jerked forward before being yanked backwards by the guard at his side. “Not a speck of diamond in that thing, huh?” Eret said, watching Dream’s struggle with contempt. “Full netherite. Loverboy’s father sure knew how to reel you in. I think *I’d* fall in love with someone for one of these.”

“I’ll tear you to fucking pieces,” Dream snarled. His hands were pulling at his bonds hard enough to make splotches of purple creep up his wrists. “You leave that kid alone, Eret. I’m warning you.”

“He asked for it!” Eret cried. “Would you rather me take a swing at your king first?”

“No!” Tubbo shrieked. “Me first, you coward!”

Nikki moved into the middle of the room, swinging Dream’s axe side to side like a croquet mallet. Her eyes glimmered like gems. “Let’s get this over with,” she said. “I want the king.”

Eret snapped their fingers again, and Tubbo’s guard — the fair-haired woman from the Badlands — dragged Tubbo to her feet. She planted her foot on the back of his neck and pressed his cheek to the floor. Tubbo moved without any resistance, eyes screwed shut. Tommy watched his bound hands slip up under the hem of his shirt and stay there. *Is he praying or something?*

“You put up a brave fight, but it’s time to give in,” said King Eret. “Do you care about your final Aether rights?”

“Suck my balls,” Tubbo replied.

“Right.” Eret scowled. “Do the honours, Nikki. I’ve had enough of this.”

“No!” Tommy wrenched himself forward and kept struggling, even as the satyr woman pulled on his hair hard enough to send his cuts splitting open again. Blood trickled down his lips and flew out in drops of dark spittle. “No, no, no!”

Nikki raised the axe above her head. A beam of sunlight set it alight in purple flame. She said something, but Tommy couldn’t read her lips over his own screaming and the ringing in his ears.

“No!”

The world exploded in bursts of violet. Tommy couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe. Acid clawed its way

down his throat and he fell forward, choking, barely aware of the sudden influx of voices around him. People were screaming, coughing, smashing into one another in their attempts to escape. He forced open his stinging eyes and saw a familiar figure dodge out of the way of a crossbow arrow, slinging down several more potion bottles of purple liquid at the feet of Dream and George's guards as he went.

"Sapnap!" Tommy's tongue went numb. A hail of burning ants travelled up his face, through the drying blood, and for a moment the excruciating was so overpowering that the world faded in nothing around him. When sense returned to him, he felt himself being carried, felt air rushing by him in short, frantic bursts.

"Tommy!" Someone was screaming. "Where's Tubbo? Where'd he go?"

"Ran—" He choked. Ranboo set him up against a wall and forced some sort of mask over his face. "Where did you—"

"Tubbo!" Ranboo repeated. His mix-matched eyes were alight with fear behind the mask's tinted lenses. "Where is he?"

"Don't know—" Tommy grappled for his friend and pulled him into a tight hug. His heart banged around in his chest like a bomb. He couldn't stop shaking. "Wilbur—"

A sudden screech filled their ears. "Get him out of here!" Came Techno's voice. Tommy felt the ropes on his wrists come free with a sharp tug. "They're locking the castle down! There's bars coming down on the windows!"

"No! I have to find Tubbo!" Tommy cried.

"Not a fucking chance! I'm not losing you too!" Techno scrubbed at his streaming eyes. "I'm the king, you listen to me. Out — *now!* "

Tommy felt the stone floor jolt and grow soft beneath his feet before he could retort. He collapsed backwards onto the grass, tipping his face to the sky, and ripped the mask from his bloody face. "Ranboo—" he started, but found no words waiting on his tongue. Everything around him seemed to be spinning. "Ranboo, you—"

"I did it! I saved you!" Ranboo brought his hands up to his head and fisted them in his hair. "I actually saved you! Holy crap!"

"What about Tubbo?" Tommy said, forcing himself to sit up. Fuck, his eyes had never stung so badly. "It's *him* they want to kill!"

"He took off before I could reach him! I don't know where he is!"

"Well, we've got to find him!" Tommy grabbed his mask and forced it back over his sticky face. "Screw what Techno says; we've got to save Tubbo!"

"Are you sure?" Ranboo asked.

"Positive! Let's go!"

To say the castle was in chaos when they teleported back in was an understatement. All manner of castle-folk dashed around them, some with masks and some without, trying desperately to look for a window or door that wasn't barricaded. In the chaos, they hardly seemed to notice Tommy and Ranboo dart between them and up one of the massive staircases. Tommy eventually took to flying,

Ranboo to teleporting beside him every ten or so feet. Neither Tubbo, nor Techno, nor the flock of Eret's guards were anywhere to be seen.

"He could be anywhere!" Ranboo screamed. "Keep looking!"

If you die today, Tubbo, I'm going to kill you. Tommy landed at the base of another staircase flanked by two massive, barred-off windows. "Fuck! We haven't got enough time to look through this entire castle. Where's Technoblade?"

"I don't—" Ranboo's eyes travelled upwards and widened. "Oh! He's outside! He just flew upwards!"

He grabbed Tommy's arm and teleported the two of them back outside. They could hear voices, distant but intense, coming from the flat top of one of the bastion towers. A single, tiny figure emerged and stepped onto the ledge, holding an axe nearly as big as he was.

Tommy felt his stomach drop into his throat. "Tubbo! No!"

The little figure turned as if it had heard him, but Tommy couldn't make out the expression on his face. His wings opened, sore but desperate to fly; the little figure bent forward slightly, pulling something from beneath its shirt. Tommy's feet left the ground; the little figure wrapped its arms around the axe and straightened, stepping backwards.

Tommy got just close enough to see Tubbo's eyes, defiant but afraid, staring down the nose of a soldier's loaded crossbow. He couldn't fly fast enough.

And there, under the eyes of so many, Tubbo let himself fall.

Chapter End Notes

damn imagine your last words being 'suck my balls'. king shit

things are picking UP MY FRIENDS and I am both stressed and excited bc I want this to be satisfying and there's like 3 mf POVs I have to switch between to make it make sense oh my god :)))) scary but hhhhhh

so quick check in with you guys! I did this some chapters (the last rescue mission chappy, lol) ago, so I want to do it again :) if you have a moment, please answer these questions:

1. Is the pacing of this story satisfactory? do you believe the plot lines introduced will be ended in a way you like?
2. Are there any characters you worry I'll forget to mention or give a proper ending to?
3. What has been your favourite aspect of the story so far?

Feedback helps me so much; I am open to changing certain plot points if I believe the audience overwhelmingly wants one. Heap your praise and your criticism onto me — I will listen! And it will help the story be as pleasant to read as I can make it :)

hope you enjoy. Happy 2 year anniversary, Dream!

-Ophelia

The Dragon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time Ranboo's feet had even begun moving, Tubbo had already hit the ground.

"No!" He forced himself to teleport, smashing himself into the tower's stone wall in his haste. Head spinning, he collapsed to his knees and dragged himself the rest of the way to Tubbo's side. His mask's glass lenses had shattered, splitting the world around him into a dim kaleidoscope of greens and golds and the deep violet of Dream's axe lodged in the hardened dirt beside him. Tommy landed on Tubbo's other side, screaming, but Ranboo's brain couldn't hold onto his words. He ripped his mask off and threw it aside. "Tubbo! Tubbo!"

Tubbo had landed on his back, his neck awkwardly outstretched. His eyes were so rolled back they were all white. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but only produced a weak, wet rasping sound. Ranboo saw something dark pooling at the back of his throat. Both his horns had broken off at the base and one had lodged itself halfway into his mouth, right through his cheek. He gave a great shudder and his white-knuckled hands tightened on something clasped between them as—

The world around them exploded in a shower of golden sparks and the great roar of something cracking open, hissing, spewing forth like the fire of a dragon. Ranboo felt himself be blown backwards, blinded. He forced his eyes open, feeling them tear up from the force of the light. "Tubbo!"

... *Tubbo?*

Tubbo was standing now, head tipped to the sky, mouth open in a silent scream. There was light coming from his mouth, from behind each eye, out of his nose and ears. Scraps of gold and emerald lay in chunks around him. He bent forward, clawing at his face as veins of gold crawled up the great wound in his cheek, then spat out a section of his horn, cleanly razed through the middle.

"*Tommy!*" He bellowed. "*Ranboo!*"

He yanked Dream's axe from the ground beside him and careened in Ranboo's direction. Tommy followed behind him, stumbling in his shock. "To Dream! He needs his axe!" Tubbo ordered, pushing his back into Ranboo's chest. The light blazing from his every feature was fading, but his skin was practically burning to the touch. "Tommy, go help Techno up on the roof, now!"

This is a king, Ranboo realized with both a burst of warmth and a deep, icy chill. *I just watched a king be born.*

Tubbo turned his head met Ranboo's eyes. He looked wild. "Go!"

And there, through the shock and fear and divine amazement, Ranboo took his first royal orders.

~

What do you even say to someone when you believe those words will be your last?

"Your diversions brought you minutes," King Eret hissed. "It's futile. None of you are leaving this castle alive."

"I'm sorry," Dream made himself whisper. "I don't think I can get us out of this."

"It's alright," George replied. His voice was so warm. "I'm still proud of you."

Dream felt a ghost of someone step over him, brandish knives. The sound echoed in his ears. "We'll see about that." *Sapnap. Brother.* "I'm not letting you fuckers near these two."

"Are you Dream's sidekick?" Came the satyr woman's voice, broken by a hacking cough. "The runt of your little litter?"

"I've loved you for a long time. I've always respected you, too. Even when we were kids." Dream leaned himself forward a little more, ignoring the burn in his thighs. He just wanted to feel him one last time. "I thought I'd die with that secret on my shoulders."

"I'm glad that you won't." George's forehead pressed into his. "I think I've loved you for much longer than I realized."

"Doesn't matter who I am," Sapnap said. "Just be aware that I'm going to kick your asses."

Dream let himself smile. It stung his lips. *That's Sapnap for you.*

The stench of Dragon's Breath in the air was thick, choking, but somehow far away. Dream felt a stranger in his skin, as though he'd pulled his arms from his metaphorical sleeves and curled up inside his own body, limp and small and defenceless. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, could barely breathe. He couldn't even bring himself to feel guilt over his pitifulness. George lay somewhere beyond, hidden in the fog, silent and still.

"I don't want to leave Sapnap behind." Of all things to say, that was what that brought tears to his eyes. "I didn't even get to say goodbye to him."

"There's two of us and one of you!" Nikki jeered, her voice hoarse. "You want to go down for those pathetic idiots?"

"They're my friends," Sapnap replied. "And getting a king indebted to you is the best way to get free cool shit. It's a great decision."

Nikki scoffed. "You're a stupid oaf."

"I think Quackity is always ready to lose me," George chuckled emptily. "Doesn't make it hurt any less, but maybe he and Sapnap will hit it off without us."

"I hope so. Sapnap always needs someone to make him laugh."

Dream opened his bleary, stinging eyes. Sapnap stood above him, sporting a familiar gas mask. Two of his biggest knives glinted in his hands. Nikki and the satyr woman stood on the couple steps before Eret's throne, puffy-eyed and snarling. Eret himself had moved back to his throne, sitting still and observant, seemingly unaffected by the gas's effects. He had the gall to look bored.

Seriously, Dream managed to think. Fuck this dude.

It was Nikki who lunged first, but the gas made her clumsy. Sapnap darted forward and slammed himself into her shoulder, knocking her to the ground. The satyr woman raised her crossbow and fired. The arrow lodged itself in the shoulder cap of Sapnap's leather chestplate. Sapnap's arm fell; he cried out, swearing through his teeth, but managed to evade another of Nikki's attacks by throwing himself sideways.

"I'll get to see my dad again," George whispered. "I hope he'll be proud of me. Of us."

"I bet he will. You're quite brilliant." Dream wanted to reach out and brush the hair from his face. "You always have been."

"You can't fight us off forever. The door is locked; you're stuck in here with us!" Said the satyr woman, ducking beneath Sapnap's knife as he slashed at her chest. "Admit defeat now and we may let you and your little littermate survive."

"Not—" Sapnap brought his elbow down hard against her jaw— "A fucking chance."

"Maybe—" Dream blinked away a tear— "We could have been friends all these years. If I hadn't been so stupid, we could have had more time together."

"No sense in regretting it now, Dream." His name on George's tongue felt like every comfort being spoken at once. "I like our story the way it is."

"Fine. Die then." The satyr woman cracked at the back of Sapnap's neck with the handle of her crossbow. He fell, gasping, and she brought him to the ground with a hard thwack to the top of his head. "I couldn't care less if you died with regrets."

"Sap—" Dream's voice felt foreign atop his tongue. The dull ache of fear began to stir in the pitch of his stomach, dazed and disoriented as a smoked bee. He forced himself up onto his hands, feeling the metal cuffs pull at his flesh. "Sapnap—"

"Enjoying yourself?" Said Nikki. "This has to feel familiar for you."

She slunk around Sapnap's other side and yanked his mask off his face. Slipping it over her own, she added in a low hiss, "It sure does for me."

Sapnap let out a choked gasp as the gas hit his eyes. Dream pulled himself forward on tingling arms. His body was so heavy. "Sap— Sapnap—"

"This is goodbye, then. Goodbye, George."

Sapnap turned his head in his direction, and a light chuckle brought a smile onto his reddening face. "Dream," he replied. "Hey, brother."

Nikki went to grab him by the hair but Sapnap jerked away, ramming into the back of her knees with one of his legs. Dream caught her as she fell and twisted her to the ground, wrapping his arms around her chest and squeezing until she wheezed. "Let her go," ordered the satyr woman. "Don't waste your seconds with your precious king misbehaving."

"Goodbye for now, Dream. I'll find you on the other side."

Though he craved to feel her bones crack beneath his fingers, Dream loosened his hold. Nikki squirmed from his arms, groaning, and brought her heel down hard on his palm. "Arse," she spat. "Can't we just kill him now?"

"Patience, Nikki." Dream could practically feel the smugness in Eret's voice. "Their friends will return shortly. There isn't much place to go."

"We shouldn't risk—"

"I know the risks, Nikki. Much better than you do." Eret's voice darkened. "I'm not afraid of little

boys and newly-crowned kings.”

Nikki huffed through her nose but said no more. After a moment of silence, Eret spoke again, his voice dripping with sadistic amusement. “In the meantime, you may dispose of the friend. He is of no use to us.”

No. Dream’s body jolted as though he’d been electrocuted. *Not Sapnap. Not now.*

Nikki let out a scoff. Through Dream’s swelling, tear-filled eyes, he watched her eyes sparkle through the mask’s lenses. “Yes, your Highness,” she said, but the words hit Dream like throwing knives. “Thank you.”

She stepped forward. Sapnap jumped to his feet and barrelled towards her. He went to smash the handle of his blade into her mask but she ducked, dagger dancing between her fingers, and sent him stumbling. When he immediately spun and went for her again, she dodged once more and drove her dagger up the outside of his forearm. *She’s his opposite*, Dream thought, *And that’ll be his downfall. Sapnap always works with familiarity.*

“Dream!” The word seemed to leave Sapnap’s mouth on instinct. He awkwardly cantered backwards, holding his bleeding arm, and ducked out of the way of another arrow. “I’ve got you, buddy!” He added, but Dream could read the unmistakable guilt in his voice as easily as he could read every other part of him. *He knows he’s going to lose. He needs my help.* Dream’s consciousness seemed to slip back farther into his brain the more he tried to grasp it. *And he knows I can’t give him any.*

Something shifted to the side of him, a mere dark blur against the swirling colours of Dream’s fading vision. *George.* He wanted to reach for him. *I don’t want to watch my friends die.*

The dark blur moved, sudden and erratic enough to make Nikki’s head turn. It collided with the satyr woman’s back and knocked the two of them to the ground. Dream heard Eret chuckle. He blinked; for a moment, the world cleared. George kicked the satyr woman’s crossbow from her hands and it skittered across the floor, firing against the wall with a resounding *crack*. Both of their eyes were swollen, streaming like Dream’s were, but George was lucid and awake and somehow untethered to the invisible weight that had Dream feeling like the floor would crack open at any moment and pull him in. *Move*, he commanded himself. *You have to. You have to save them.*

But his body didn’t listen, and Dream wanted to scream. He hated the smell of the Dragon’s Breath, hated being blind, hated the phantom fish knives skittering across every inch of bare flesh on his body. The satyr woman wrapped her hands around George’s neck and pulled him backwards, arching his back until his eyes bulged and rolled back. Nikki buried her dagger into Sapnap’s chest.

The world in front of him abruptly changed. In a moment, Tubbo stood before him, covered in dirt and blood and gold. His eyes were blazing. He shoved something into Dream’s hands, stepped back into Ranboo’s waiting grip, and yelled a piercing, “*Get fucked !*” As he was whisked away in a burst of purple particles.

What? Dream’s hands tightened on something between his fingers. The weight was so familiar. *What just happened? Where is Sapnap? Where is George?*

He made eye contact with Nikki and her eyes widened. She ran for him, half in fear and half in anger, one hand outstretched and one pulled backwards, holding her dagger to throw it.

Dream could finally feel his fingertips again.

The dagger hit the flat side of his axe and clattered to the floor. Nikki pulled another one from her pants and hurled it at him. Dream blocked it again. Two more came in rapid succession, each meeting their end in a burst of sparks. Dream brought the axe down hard between her feet and she shrieked, hopping backwards as he yanked it from the splintering floor.

I'm me again. Dream looked to Eret and found them staring, expressionless. *It's never felt so good before.*

"Puffy!" Nikki yelled. "Help!"

The satyr woman let George go and shot to her feet, but her crossbow was too far to reach. She yanked a long knife from her coat and raised it, but Dream barely missed slicing her fingers off as he whacked it straight out of her hands. *Don't touch George.* He drove the handle of his axe into her sternum and watched her gasp with thrumming satisfaction. The pain in his eyes and nose and mouth didn't matter anymore. *Don't touch Sapnap. Don't touch any of my fucking friends.*

Nikki and Puffy scattered to the walls, guarded and panting, and Dream dropped to his knees by Sapnap's side. "It's not deep," Sapnap gasped out, wrenching the bloody dagger from the leather. "It's just a scratch. I'm fine. I'm fine."

Dream yanked him into his arms and squeezed until his arms shook. "I'm fine," Sapnap repeated softly. "I'm okay."

Eret clucked. "Aw, how sweet." They leaned back in their chair, crossing one leg over the other. "I'm rather entertained."

Dream went to stand. "Don't try, Dream," Eret commanded, freezing him in his place. "I'll make you regret it."

Something rumbled below their feet hard enough to rattle the windows. Eret blinked, shifting in their seat as another earthquake made the floors vibrate. For the first time, they looked actually unsettled. Puffy and Nikki shared terrified glances. Dream looked down and watched the stone bricks beneath his feet shift ever so slightly, pulled from their long-standing resting places by an unseen force.

"Your Highness?" Nikki said nervously. The floor beneath their feet suddenly bulged, cracking upwards with a thunderous roar. Dream scooped Sapnap up into his arms and sprinted to the far wall, George following at his heels. "Your Highness?" Her voice rose to a panicked crescendo. Eret rose from their seat, watching the moving stone with wonder. "Your Highness! Your Highness!"

A sleek black head reared through the dust and fog, thrashing side to side. A single monstrous paw clawed over the crumbling stone, pulling the great beast upwards enough to let two fleshy wings unravel to the air. Someone screamed; Dream wasn't sure who. The sound was almost triumphant.

George grabbed Dream's hand and squeezed. "Holy fuck," he breathed. "That's a fucking—"

The beast tipped its head to the ceiling and roared. The windows shattered in a spray of broken, coloured shards.

"Dragon!"

~

For some reason, Tommy's brain refused to wrap around the fact that he'd just watched his best

friend die.

To be fair, he'd exploded back to life almost immediately, covered in gold and light and shit like some horrific storybook creature, but still. He'd *died*. Tommy had watched him *die*.

It didn't seem to really be hitting him. Tommy really didn't mind.

"Tommy, duck!"

An arrow whizzed over his head, splintering against one of the nearby towers. Before the Eretian knight had a chance to load another one, Techno sent them flying off the roof with a single, powerful thrust of his wing. "Go to your friends!" He ordered, twisting a sword from another knight's hands. "Get out of here!"

"No! I'm helping you!" Tommy launched himself onto a taller knight's back and bashed at their head with his fists until they collapsed.

Techno scowled. "Dad's going to kill me if you die!" He sent another knight to the ground with a resounding *thwack* to their temple and grabbed their sword from their limp hands.

"Then tell me what do to and keep me alive!"

Techno met his eyes for a single moment, then looked beyond him and jolted. "Watch out!"

Something knocked Tommy to the ground and his left shoulder exploded with searing pain. Techno shot over him in a black shadow, sending both he and the attacking knight over the edge of the roof, but careened back into the sky in less than a second with the knight nowhere to be seen. He landed over Tommy and yanked him to his feet. "You want to be useful?" He shouted, shoving a short, stocky sword into Tommy's hands. There was blood on it, still sticky. "Be as distracting as you can!"

Tommy looked down at the weapon in his hands. Techno folded back into the moving mass of knights, a beacon of dangerous unbelonging. *A distraction. I can do that.* He heard the familiar noise of a crossbow unloading and moved on instinct, shooting up into the cloudless sky. *Hurricane Tommy. One last time.*

The first knight he descended upon fled on his own, holding the battered remains of his helmet in his hands. Tommy tore through two more, screaming, slashing, moving without thought or reason. Blades and crossbow arrows sliced through his clothes and bits of his flesh but his veins were too filled with storm clouds and ice and fire to feel anything at all. Techno moved beside him, behind him, in front of him — they danced in tandem, for the first time in either of their lives. *This is so cool.* Tommy grabbed the loading arrow straight from a knight's crossbow. *Wilbur, you're here. You're helping me.*

An electric jolt ran down his spine and Tommy wanted to laugh and cry all at once. *Wilbur, Wilbur, Wilbur. I miss you so much.* The number of remaining Eretian knights had finally begun to dwindle. Many had disappeared on their own accord. *Look, Wilbur. I'm helping.* Something rumbled somewhere near. *I'll save them, Wilbur. I'll save them all.*

The castle below them grew suddenly loud, drawing the attention of the remaining knights. When a bellowing roar pierced the air with enough force to shatter every single window in sight, the Eretian knights scattered in every direction. "The fuck is that?" Techno said.

Dragon. Tommy remembered his conversation with Foolish in a burst of vividity. *They pulled a dragon from the portal. It's here. It's fucking here.*

“To the throne room!” Tommy shrieked. He practically threw himself over the roof’s ledge and soared past the castle walls. “We have to save them!”

“What?” Techno’s voice was quiet over the roaring wind.

“They’ve got a fucking dragon!”

~

Holy shit.

Ranboo had a fucking dragon.

Life had never been so cool before.

“Go, Michael!” Ranboo wrapped his legs around the dragon’s neck. The scales were soft beneath his flesh, slightly rubbery in the way Tubbo always said Ranboo’s ears were. “Go, Michael, go!”

Michael caught a fleeing knight between his jaws and flung them against the far wall, where they collapsed with a sickening crunch. Ranboo pressed his heel into Michael’s side, steering the great beast sideways. He stepped over the remains of the throne room doors, flattening chunks of stone brick beneath his claws. Purple smoke curled over his lips, leaking through the gaps of his missing teeth.

“Where are you, coward?” Ranboo roared to the air. “Come on out and fight me!”

King Eret and his two knights were nowhere to be seen. In fact, almost *nobody* was to be seen. He caught sight of Dream, whizzing in between pieces of rubble, and waved to him. Dream whipped his head up to look at him, eyes wide with terror. “What the fuck are you doing?” He shrieked.

Michael swung around and ripped his tail through Eret’s ornate throne like a knife through butter. “I’m getting us out of here!” Ranboo replied. “Get everyone out and go!”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!” Dream ducked out of the way of flying splinters of wood and gold. “That’s a fucking dragon!”

“I’m an enderman, Dream! He listens to me! Just go!”

“I’m not leaving you in here with that fucking thing alone!”

“Then shut up and hop on!”

Dream paused, eyes widening. “Not a fucking chance!” he hissed. “Are you fucking—“

“*Do it!*” Ranboo ordered, with enough force to make Dream furrow his brow in offended indignation. “And you’re teaching me to be a knight when we’re done here!”

With about as much reluctance as a human person could muster, Dream clambered up onto Michael’s back and slotted himself up against Ranboo, throwing his free arm over his shoulders. “Don’t get cocky,” he warned, yelping as a purple fireball shot from Michael’s open mouth and sent the bannisters up into flames. “This could go badly really quickly.”

I just teleported a dragon upstairs all by myself. Ranboo squeezed Michael’s sides with his heels and the dragon clambered forward, surprisingly fast on his emaciated legs. His wings opened as they entered the great hall, tearing down windows and drapes and painting as Micheal fought to give himself air. *I think I’m on top of the world.*

“Have you seen King George or Tubbo?” Ranboo asked.

Dream buried his face into Ranboo’s back as Michael hurled another fireball at the floor, sending purple fog spilling into the already-smoky air. “King George took off with Sapnap when the dragon broke the doors,” he said. “I haven’t seen Tubbo since he gave me my axe back.”

“Techno and Tommy were on the roof last time I saw them,” Ranboo replied. “So I think they’re safe.”

Michael turned up one of the stairways and screeched. Though it was barely tall enough for him to squeeze through, Michael drove his torso through the narrow gap and began to force himself up the spiralling stairs. “Hold on!” Dream pushed Ranboo to Michael’s back and flattened himself on top of him. They lurched from side to side, having to pull their legs to their sides to avoid being crushed against the walls. Michael remained in his frenzy to get upstairs, even as his wings cracked and tore under the pressure of the walls around them. Something was calling him. *Some sort of scent?*

“Where the fuck did you find a dragon?” Dream yelled into his ear. He grunted as his back hit the ceiling, forcing him down against Ranboo with enough force to wind him.

“Basement!” Ranboo wheezed. “They had him locked up! It was—“ Michael dragged himself forward another couple feet, trapping them even further— “It was horrible!”

“These things can’t survive in the overworld! They’ll go mad!”

“I’m going to save him! I have to!”

“You can’t, Ranboo. It’s impossible.”

Ranboo gritted his teeth as the ceiling above them began splinter with the pressure. “Then I’ll try!”

The ceiling gave way as Michael entered the second-floor hall and they gasped for air, coughing. “Where the hell is he going?” Dream said.

“I’m not sure!” Ranboo replied. Michael careened back into motion, stopping to blow down every door they passed and poke his head in. His expression had changed; his mouth had fallen open and stayed there, lips pulled back into a sort of demented grin. Purple mist dripped from his jowls like foam from a dying animal’s. His eyes were wide, always moving. *Freaky*. Ranboo’s hands tightened on Michael’s neck. *He must be stressed*.

A set of golden double doors sat at the end of the hall, tall and foreboding behind the fog. Michael jolted as if overcome by some great agony and bolted for them, leaping and crashing as his broken wings beat wildly against the walls. Ranboo felt Dream’s arm tighten around him, but he refused to let his nervousness leak into his expression. He had to be brave. *I’m going to save Tubbo and Tommy. I’m going to save them and then we’ll all be happy together. I know we will.*

“Brace!” Dream pressed them both flat again as Michael collided with the golden doors head on, bending them like scrap metal. They crashed into a windowless room, dark and dim, empty save for a single figure standing in the shadows at the other end. Their white eyes glowed ever so slightly. Michael froze.

“Hello, boys.”

mouth foaming and hissing and growling and scratching here you go <3

I am so stressed out writing these chapters holy shit WE'RE SO CLOSE TO BEING DONE???? I've been putting out a chapter a week since fucking December what the hell

do I know what the hell I'm doing with this story? Somewhat. Is it still mostly blind? Yep. Adds spice.

Official Ophie Question Time!! If I don't get enough answers I will kill someone beware (/j of course I already know who will die ;))

Who is your favourite character in this story? Why do you like them? Do you love to hate them? Hate to love them? Have they grown on you or do you relish in their repugnancy? Tell me! I want to know so much! /gen

ohohohoho,,,, it's gearing up, my friends. It's not over yet. Michael's on his silly goofy mood arc and nobody's going to like it

... or maybe one person will. Guess you'll find out.

-Ophelia

Checkmate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream squeezed the handle of his axe. It was cold beneath his fingers.

“You.”

“Congratulations,” Eret said. Their voice was soft. “Both of you. You’ve actually surprised me. That’s no easy task, I tell you.”

They took a single step forward, illuminating their face in the light spilling in from the ruined doorway. Alone and unarmed, they were not even wearing their crown. “You, child,” they hummed. “Are wondrously brave. It takes a true knight to harness a beast such as that one. And you even named him.” In the dimness, their smile could have seemed human. “I’m impressed.”

Ranboo’s breath hitched. His ears were pulled downward, twitching as he trembled. Dream saw his heels dig into the dragon’s sides, but the emaciated beast remained suspended in place, so still that it was hard to tell if it was still breathing. Purple smoke continued to drip from its opened mouth, leaking through the gaps where fangs once sat.

“And you,” Eret said, lifting their pupil-less eyes to meet Dream’s gaze, “Are so eternally stupid that it’ll last you lifetimes.”

Dream pursed his lips. “It’s not my job to be clever.” *We need to get out of here right now.* “My stupidity comes in handy quite a lot.”

“I would have given you a new life here. Hannah’s fought so hard to give you a chance. And yet —” Eret tilted his head, gritting his teeth — “You’ll throw away everything just for the privilege of dying by that king’s side.”

“A new life amongst merciless killers?” Dream scoffed. “I’d choose death a thousand times over.”

“You are so easily charmed by shiny things,” Eret hissed. “I once valued your skill, your determination. I saw myself in your potential. Now I look at you and see a dog so desperate to be loved that he willingly keeps himself leashed.”

Dream placed a hand on the middle of Ranboo’s back, just hard enough to steady him, but the child had already grown still with terror. “I am loved as I am,” he said. “I don’t need to be loved by you.”

“And for that, you’ll die.” There was a hint of bitterness in Eret’s voice. “I hope you’re happy with yourself.”

“I’m not dying today. Nobody is — not even you.” Dream raised his axe. “Let us all go home. I’m done with fighting with you.”

Eret didn’t respond for a moment. It was a Ranboo who piped up first. “And we’re taking Michael,” he said in a shaking voice. “You guys don’t deserve him.”

Eret’s face thinned into an awkward, blank-eyed grimace. “I’m not letting any of you leave this territory alive.”

“We’ve trapped you; it’s too late,” Dream said. “Surrender and let us leave.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Fine.” Dream tapped Ranboo’s shoulder. “Turn the dragon around. I want to be out of here.”

A moment of silence. “He’s not moving,” Ranboo whispered. “Something’s wrong with him.”

“No there’s not,” Eret said. “He’s perfect.”

They raised a finger and curled it.

“Come.”

Ranboo lurched sideways with a choked squeak as the dragon beneath them began to march forward on its shuddering legs, wheezing with every step. Dream managed to hold himself upright, but his axe slid from his fingers and crashed to the floor. “Ranboo!” He grabbed the boy by the arm and yanked him back against his chest. *Something is very, very wrong. We can’t stay in here.*

The dragon dragged itself forward, pulled by invisible puppet strings, until its muzzle hit Eret’s outstretched palm. “Good creature,” Eret murmured. “You know, I’ve always loved the End. It calls to me.”

With Ranboo still in his arms, Dream hefted himself sideways and rolled to them to the floor. Eret made no move to stop them. They smiled, letting their thumb move from side to side over the dragon’s heaving nostrils. “They say an ancestor of mine was born there, raised to conquer any land he saw. He could make any beast fall before him in subservience.” They looked up, white eyes gleaming. “The genes run strong, as you can see.”

No. No, no, no, no. This is not happening. The dragon’s tail began to move, tightening around their legs like a snake. Dream practically flung himself out of the way, ducked as it came flying back at their faces, and managed to grab his axe from the ground before screaming, “GO!” In Ranboo’s ear.

Eret’s face twisted into a snarl. “Kill them!”

Ranboo teleported them away just as the dragon whirled around, jaws open to swallow them whole.

~

“George, I’m fine, you don’t have to carry me.”

George dropped Sapnap against the barn wall, letting him painstakingly shift himself into a comfortable position. “You were stabbed,” he said. “That doesn’t sound fine to me.”

“It’s not deep, I promise. Dream’s done worse to me with a fork before.” Sapnap slid his hand underneath his leather chestplate and grimaced. “Speaking of the bastard — where the *fuck* is he?”

“He said he’d follow me. I didn’t realize he wasn’t until we were already out here, and you can’t really turn back when there’s a juvenile ender dragon tearing up the throne room.” George collapsed against a bale of hay and pressed his hands into his eyes. “Fucker. He’ll get himself killed.”

The air around them rippled, eerily silent, as if all the Eretian soldiers had fled straight into the forest and taken every insect and bird with them. *I’d call them cowards if it wasn’t the right thing*

to do right now, George thought bitterly. *A dragon, Eret? Really? Haven't you made my life hard enough?*

"We have to find the kids. Ranboo was on the dragon's fucking back for some reason, so I bet he's still in that castle," Sapnap said. "Gods, I hope he's with Dream. I'll never forgive myself if he dies because I brought him somewhere dangerous."

"You *brought* him here?" George hissed. "He's twelve! He's practically a baby!"

"He was desperate and can teleport, Your Highness," Sapnap answered with a groan. "I had no other choice. I couldn't get here in time without him."

"Fuck." George pressed on his temples. "That's Dream, three twelve-year-olds, and Technoblade to account for."

"Count Dream in with the twelve-year-olds, please. He's got about as much sense as them sometimes."

A small smile cracked the grimace on Sapnap's face, though a hiss of discomfort drowned his momentary amusement. "You need a health potion," George said. "You can't fight like this."

"I can," Sapnap replied sharply. "Once it stops bleeding."

George raised an eyebrow. "And when's it going to stop bleeding?"

"In an hour or two."

"Great. We'll be dead *and* cold by then." George looked around at the empty stalls, the miscellaneous tools hung on the aged spruce walls. "Think I can fight off a dragon with a shit-covered pitchfork?"

"I'd fucking pay to see you try." Sapnap stuck a hand into his vest and pulled out two knives no longer than George's hands. "That's all I have left. Don't lose them."

"I can't take them. They're better with you than with me," George said.

"You just said I couldn't fight!" A knife landed in the sludge between George's feet, dangerously close to his toes. "Take one, idiot. I don't want you unarmed."

"Fine," George muttered. "Thank you."

Sapnap's face softened. He shifted, pulling himself farther upright, and rubbed at the slice in his forearm with his fingers. "I don't like this silence. It's weird. Battlefields are *never* silent."

"That much I know," George replied. He slid the knife into his belt, ignoring the prick of its blade against his thigh. "We can't just sit here."

The earth beneath their feet rumbled like the aftershock of an explosion. Sapnap's face blanched. "That's not good."

"Up, now." George bent himself beneath Sapnap's arm and pulled him to his feet. "I'm not having a barn collapse onto us if there's an earthquake. Keep your eyes peeled for Tommy or Technoblade. They may be flying."

If Technoblade's dead, we're all finished. They limped their way across the neat castle lawn and ducked into the safety of a flowering labyrinth. Motionless corpses dotted the grass around one of

the bastion towers like flowers in all shades of brown and silver and red. *I can't be the strongest adult here right now.*

"Fuck. I can't see anyone." George clenched his fists until they stung. "If Dream had just followed me like he was *supposed* to—"

"Oh, you know he's not leaving until those kids are out." Sapnap said. "Helpless little princes in danger trump kings."

"Helpless," George breathed. "Tubbo had totem revival marks on him when he teleported in with Ranboo. You know what that means, right?"

Sapnap looked down. "Yeah."

"They're braver than all three of us combined. It's us who are fucking helpless sometimes." George fell into a crouch, burying his stinging eyes in his knees. "Gods, Sapnap. I don't know what to do! I'm useless here!"

"No you're not!" Sapnap cried. "You're like the smartest one here!"

"Like that means anything when there's a fucking dragon on the loose!" George dug his eyes into his knees until swirls of nothingness bloomed behind his eyelids. "Yeah, let me slay it with my incredible knowledge of pre-Great War literature and chess strategies. How groundbreaking."

"Well, you're here. There's nothing you can do about it. Do what kings do and keep up the morale or something."

Dad, help me. I'm so bad at this. You never should have died. The blade of Sapnap's knife pierced through the material of his pants, jolting him back into his body. *Someone will die because of me today. I'm a deadweight. No better than a meat shield.*

"The only reason my morale is existent at all is because you, Dream, and Technoblade are some of the best fighters I've ever known," George said softly. "You guys are smart enough to get us out of here."

"And you're smart enough to make up some crazy-ass plan to help us do it." Sapnap whacked George's ankle with his foot, but there was a gentleness to his voice that made the bristles growing along the back of George's neck melt into nothing. "Help me up. We're not getting anything done hiding in a maze."

George stuck out a hand and Sapnap took it, hefting himself to his feet with the leverage. His hands were warm, calloused in the bend of every knuckle. Just like Dream's were.

"I think you're my best friend."

Dream hadn't answered. For a moment, George had feared that he'd gone too far, danced over another invisible boundary. He feared that Dream would pull away again, flee into familiarity while George was left to set himself aflame in that delicious novelty.

But then Dream's nose had bumped with his, and his breath had tickled George's lips, sweet with familiar tastes, and George's fear had floated away.

Kissing him had felt like coming home.

"George?"

George blinked. His fingers were still locked around Sapnap's palm, stiff but gentle. Sapnap looked at him with soft eyes. "Are you okay?"

George gave his hand a squeeze. He liked the way it made him grin. "Yeah, I am. Thank you."

"Anything for you and Dream, man," Sapnap said. "You're a good king. Being kind of enslaved to you isn't too bad."

"If you survive this, I'll set you free. You can do whatever you want. I'll give you some money to travel if you wish."

Another earthquake sent branches falling from the lines of hedges around them. "I hate travelling. You couldn't get rid of me if you tried." Sapnap put a hand on George's shoulder and pushed him forward. They limped through the field until they hit the castle wall. "Pay me in cool gear and shit instead. I want netherite knives."

"Done. I'll find a smith drunk enough to try it." George clutched Sapnap's arm as another earthquake rocked the ground beneath their feet. Now that they were close to the castle walls, they could hear each individual explosion, every sudden *boom* that rattled the stone bricks. They seemed to be getting stronger by the second.

George blinked. Sapnap leaned his face against the castle wall, eyes narrowing in focus as he listened. *No.*

They were getting *louder*.

"Watch out!" George grabbed Sapnap by the arm and yanked him sideways, throwing the two of them into the grass. Just as he'd pulled Sapnap to his feet and pushed him even farther away, the stone wall shattered outwards in a violent cloud of dust and fragments of stone. George felt one smash into the small of his back and send him to his knees. The dragon's hulking figure writhed through the dissipating fog, jaws snapping wildly. Two figures appeared a couple feet away in a burst of purple particles, locked together in their terror.

"Dream!" George screamed, but they were gone before he could even blink. The dragon sniffed around in the wreckage for a moment, beating its broken wings, then tipped its head to the sky and howled in frustration. In the light of the fading day, its sickliness was stark. *This dragon is dying.* George watched it turn its head to the sun and shy away, smoking around the ears and muzzle. A massive fang fell from its lips as it turned and shot after the trail of purple particles that stretched out of sight. *It's decaying before our eyes.*

"George, run!" Sapnap cried. The dragon disappeared around the corner, hissing and moaning and screeching all at once. If it had heard them, it didn't care enough to even pause in its chase. *It's after Dream and Ranboo, he thought. That's who it wants.*

"We have to go after them." George unsheathed Sapnap's knife instinctively. It was foreign in his hands, comforting nonetheless. He turned to Sapnap. "It's going for Dream and Ranboo. We have to—"

In the blink of an eye, Sapnap's face changed. He reached for George, catching him by the shoulder, and wrenched him downwards. Something sharp grazed the top of his head. Up came Sapnap's other arm, knife wedged between his fingers. They opened. The knife flew from them like a dart.

It hit its mark with a wet *thud*.

“George!” Sapnap crouched by him and wrapped him in a tight hug. “Holy fuck— I just — I saw the bow, and—“

The rest of his words died on his tongue. George’s head was spinning. A limp figure collapsed out of the dust, their blood stark against the chunks of sun-bleached stone against which their twitching body fell. It was the sheep woman, face locked in an expression of shock. She reached up with a squeak, fumbled with the handle of Sapnap’s blade, and yanked it from the deep gash in her throat. Darkness spilled down her pirate’s coat, onto her white fur, onto the stone and the grass below. She pitched forward, wordlessly moving her mouth as blood began to leak between her teeth.

George’s feet moved on their own and he was running before he knew it. “Puffy!” A female voice shrieked. *I just watched her die.* Though Sapnap had slipped from his physical grasp, he knew he was behind him. *She’s dead. That woman is dead.* Wilbur’s face flashed against his eyelids with every step, pale and forever taut in a silent scream.

The dragon’s wail rattled George’s brain, but he followed the sounds as though they were a lifeline. Anything to escape the silence, the quietude of a broken throat, of lungs with no air, of bodies already cooling by the time someone shoved a totem of life into their hands.

Something screamed. *It’s the dragon,* George told himself, even though dragons could not scream with such palpable grief. *It’s just the dragon.*

He rounded the corner, stepping into the entrance of a garden so splendid that it shocked him into stillness for a moment. Flowers of every colour bloomed on every branch, bush, and tree. The paths were as intricate as the threads of fine lace, bordered with creeping thyme. At the centre stood a lavish fountain, surrounded by rose bushes in the shape of curving sun rays. The dragon circled overhead, its flight unsteady and strenuous. Though traces of purple particles littered the area in a fine mist, neither Ranboo nor Dream were anywhere to be seen.

George felt someone grab his arm and yank him beneath the shelter of a small willow tree, hidden from the dragon’s wild eyes. “King Eret is here,” Sapnap breathed. “He’s got two knights with him. I left my fucking knife with the lady—“

“Shh—“ George pressed the knife into his waiting fingers— “I know I’ll be useless with it. Just keep me alive as long as you can.”

The willow branches hissed as the dragon roared again, parting in the wind to reveal King Eret’s familiar figure standing at the garden’s other entrance. Hannah and Nikki flanked his either side. There was blood on Nikki’s hands, on her embroidered vest and pants, streaked down her broken face in what could have been fingerprints. She clutched the sword in her hands like a lifeline. “Come out!” She bellowed, voice breaking. “Face us like a king, you coward!”

“Stay here,” George ordered. “And stay out of sight. If they kill me on sight, try and take Nikki out. She deserves it the most out of all of them.”

Sapnap nodded silently, shrinking into himself until he was small, and George tried to loosen fear’s hold on his lungs as he stood and walked into the blazing sunlight. Thorny vines locked around his ankles almost immediately, rooting him to his place. The dragon continued its circling above their heads. King Eret had something strapped to their wrist.

... Strapped to their wrist?

“George,” Eret said. It was neither a question, nor an insult, more a simple acknowledgment than anything else. In another situation, it could have sounded friendly. “I’d have hoped that you’d be

less troublesome than this. You seemed so eager to surrender back in the throne room, to die with a sense of dignity. Now I'm forced to slaughter you like an animal."

The thing on their wrist glimmered in the sun like a precious jewel. George squinted his eyes, but he couldn't make out more than its gleaming, golden surface. *Is it a bracelet of some sort? Their crown?* Whatever it was, it kept attracting Nikki's eyes, making them spark with hate and envy and pain all at once. Her hands were trembling. Even Hannah seemed shaken, unable to bloom flowers along her vines.

"How many times have I tried to get it through your head, George? That you can't save everybody, or lead a kingdom without at least a little bit of spine?" Eret moved closer, the whites of their eyes glowing in the sunlight. The object on his wrist cleared as he neared; the flames of recognition burst behind George's eyeballs.

King Eret had a totem.

"You're falling on deaf ears once again, Eret," He managed to say. "I wouldn't take your advice, so I won't take your criticism."

Eret scowled. "A coward *and* an ass until his final breaths. I could almost commend you."

"All I ever wanted was to live in peace." George shifted in his binds. Eret and his guards stopped a couple feet away, stiff as though ready to strike at any moment. "It's you who's brought on all of this destruction and death. You're the one keeping this war going."

"None of you deserve to keep your kingdoms," Eret spat. "You're all foolish, spineless morons. Every last one of you. Poor old Phil couldn't even keep his crown atop his head when his idiot son got himself killed."

"Wilbur died because your soldier was too stupid to listen to a god's advice. *He* killed them. Wilbur jumped into the lion's mouth to save someone he loved."

"Oh, and where did that get him?" Eret pouted. "Into a coffin? Good job. And now his dear little brother will join him in the grave anyway."

George gritted his jaw. "You wouldn't know true courage if it shoved itself down your throat."

"Courage is allowing people to die when they deserve it. King Schlatt died because he wasn't smart enough to protect his country, your father died because he was stupid enough to play duel with the best marksman in the world, and—" a cruel smile split Eret's face — "Wilbur died because he never could have learned to be his own person outside of that boy. He lived as an extension, and he died as one too. Killing him was practically a mercy."

Fire bubbled in George's veins. "Don't speak of Wilbur like that. He was braver than you'd ever be."

The dragon took a sudden nosedive and crashed into the ornate fountain, spraying water in every direction. Its tail ripped through several of the sun ray bushes. Eyes wide and rolling, it paused and bent its head low against the chunks of broken quartz, heaving and choking with every breath.

"It seems the enderman boy and your knight are in this garden," Eret hummed. "Perhaps I'll give them a little break for now. Allow the dragon to... change his focus."

The dragon's head swivelled until it was staring straight at him with blood-shot eyes. It opened its bleeding, slobbering jowls, and hissed.

“Let him run, Hannah.” The vines abruptly retreated from his ankles. “It’ll be better to watch.”

Adrenaline was a hell of a thing when it kicked in.

Fuck! George threw himself out of the way of another fireball, watching it engulf a nearby hedge in violet flames. The heat was instantaneous, singeing his eyelashes and the shadow of facial hair beneath his jaw. He pushed himself to his feet, gasping, only to feel the familiar sting of Dragon’s Breath against his skin as the dragon landed beside him as coughed out a spray of the misty venom. George turned on his heel and sprinted down another of the garden’s winding corridors, falling to his knees in a thicket of thorny red flowers. His heart was beating so quickly he wanted to be sick. *I can’t run forever.* Sweat dribbled down the back of his stinging neck. *It’ll catch me at some point.*

The dragon’s head slid around the corner, bent low to the ground. Smoke continued to waft from the flesh of its back and neck, leaving open wounds where the scales had fallen away. It chuffed low in its throat, clacking its jaws rhythmically. Only one of its massive fangs remained in its mouth, starkly shiny against the rest of its broken teeth. George closed his eyes and prayed to every god he knew the name of. *Not now. Not here. Not to that thing.*

Fear grasped him in an iron hold as he heard the dragon shriek, but the agony of flame or poison for which he braced himself never came. George cracked open an eye. The dragon had turned away from him, head lifted high above the hedges and into the branches of a gnarled tree. It was snarling, hard — whatever was hidden within the foliage was certainly not a friend. *Ranboo?* George thought immediately. *Dream?*

He flinched as the dragon snapped, but the voice that cried out in a shrill, mocking tone made both fear and excitement shoot through his veins like an arrow. *Tommy!* George dared to rise up on his knees, craning to look between the branches. The end of a fiery red wing beat down against the dragon’s nose, making it curl its lip. George had to hold back a sudden cackle when a small, booted foot kicked down and bashed the beast straight between its cloudy eyes. *Someone’s here. I’m not alone. I haven’t been abandoned.*

“Die!” Tommy shrieked, somehow louder than the dragon’s angry roars. “Stay the fuck away from King George!”

Another figure shot over the hedges and dragged a stripe down the dragon’s back with a sword. Before the dragon had the chance to do more than rear backwards and whirl around, they had already disappeared. *Techno really is the fastest flyer in the country,* George thought in wonder. The dragon opened its wings and hefted itself into the air, spewing out clouds of poison in its rage. Once it had crashed over the hedges, distracted in its furious chase of a man it would never catch, George pushed himself from his thorny shelter and darted to the base of the tree. “Tommy!” He half-cried, half-whispered. The boy practically fell into his arms, arms wrapped around his neck like a vice. “Oh, thank the gods, Tommy. You’re okay.”

“I saved you!” Tommy buried his face in George’s shoulder. “I saved you! I actually saved you!”

George pulled back and cupped the child’s face in his hands. There were no bruises, no cuts — whatever they’d done to make him scream, it hadn’t left marks. “Are you hurt?” He asked. “What did they do to you?”

“Nothing!” Tommy laughed. “I’m okay! Come on!”

They ran in the opposite direction of the dragon’s path of carnage, finding shelter in a small gazebo surrounded by blooming, bell-shaped flowers. Tommy bent down to sniff them, but George yanked

him into the small space and pressed the two of them to the wall. "Stay low!" He hissed. "King Eret and two of his guards are probably patrolling this whole place. We have to stay out of sight."

"Dream and Sapnap are fighting them already. I saw them when I was flying over," Tommy replied. "The weird fucking flower lady's really mad."

Oh, gods. Sapnap's injured. George swallowed nervously. "Do you have any weapons on you? I need to go help them."

Tommy shook his head. "I can get some, though. There are lots of swords up on the roof."

"Go grab me one. Be safe, and stay out of the way of that dragon. I'll go help Sapnap and Dream; you have to find Tubbo and Ranboo. I want all three of you here in this gazebo, together and safe."

Tommy straightened, saluting excitedly. He was practically vibrating with energy. "Yes, Sir!" He crowed. George watched him shoot into the sky and disappear around one of the towers in a red blur.

His heart thumped behind his ribs. *Gods, give me strength. I think I'm running to my death.*

~

Never once in his life had Dream had to fight someone he considered a friend.

There was always a first for everything.

Dream sunk his axe into a striking vine, severing it down the middle. The vine reared back, lashing wildly, then stilled. Another one attached itself to his ankle and yanked him sideways, but Dream rolled with the force and severed it beneath his own weight.

"I hate you!" Hannah screamed. Her dark hair moved about her in wild clumps as if it were bundles of vines as well. "I hate you so much!"

She stepped backwards as Dream shot to his feet and advanced on her, but her foot caught on a piece of the ruined fountain. She fell with a squeak, landing hard on her back, and Dream took the moment her vines were distracted to close the rest of the distance between them and throw himself upon her, pinning her arms to the ground with the handle of his axe. "Stop this!" He commanded. "I'm not going to kill you, Hannah. You can't make me."

Hannah spat in his face. "Fuck you!" She hissed. A vine separated from her thorny necklace and jabbed into his eye. In the moment he was blinded, she wiggled out from underneath him and scurried away on all fours. *You're so familiar like that,* Dream thought mournfully. *You were my friend, once. I had so little to love back then, so you were the closest thing I had.*

"Get out of this place!" Dream blocked another vine as it lashed against his chest. The thorns had grown larger, the flowers wilting and rotting away before his eyes. "I won't follow you! You can be free!"

"I *am* free!" Tears dribbled down Hannah's face, leaving tracks in the dirt. "You're the one who's trapped! I tried to save you!"

A vine wrapped around Dream's wrist and yanked him to his knees. Another one curled around his palm, squeezing its thorns into his flesh until his axe slipped from his bleeding fingers. Hannah darted forward, snatching it from the ground, and held it high above her head with shaking arms. "You're a lost cause now!"

Sapnap seemed to appear out of mid-air, bowling into her side with incredible force. She hit the dirt with a cry and the axe flew from her fingers, landing a few feet away. Dream tore his hands free of their thorny binds. “Go!” He cried to Sapnap. “Find George! I’ve got this!”

Sapnap wrenched Hannah’s hand back to the ground as she reached up to claw at his face. “She’s not letting up!”

You can’t save her! Is what he meant.

Sapnap rolled off Hannah’s legs and she began kicking wildly, screaming in such a furious, shrill voice that Dream could no longer understand her. “Hannah, stop it!” He begged, forcing her shoulders to the ground with his hands. “It doesn’t have to end like this!”

“Fuck you, dog!” She snapped. “You killed my friends — my *family* —“

“All we wanted was peace! It was you guys who began this!” Pressure began to build behind Dream’s eyes. “Both Wilbur and Jack would still be alive right now if you’d have just listened to us!”

“Eret was right about you.” A vine wrapped around his throat from behind and yanked him backwards until he was sprawled on the ground. Dream grappled at it, gasping as it began rapidly tightening. “You’re a coward. You’re an idiot. You live your life on a god-damned leash because you know nobody would give a shit about you otherwise.”

Dream screwed his eyes shut. His lungs were burning. He scrabbled with the vine around his throat, but his stubby nails couldn’t get enough of a grip to pull back on it. *She’s trying to kill me*, he realized, with both sudden terror and the deep ache of seeing it coming. *She’ll choke the life out of me right in the middle of this fucking garden.*

Hannah leaned in close, adding her hands to the pressure on Dream’s windpipe. Her teeth were bared, eyes narrowed into slits. “You made your choice,” she hissed, dripping tears onto his face. Her features began to fade in and out of static. “And I made mine. Goodbye, forest boy.”

Dream stretched his hand out to the side and felt them close on the back of his axe’s blade. The netherite was sun-warmed, smooth and light in his hold.

Gripping the blade like a stone, Dream swung his hand up and to the side. The blade sunk into the side of Hannah’s neck, slicing through a portion of her hair. The vines went limp instantaneously. “Hannah—“ Dream choked. The metallic tang of blood filled his nose, dribbling into his eyes as he pushed her writhing body off of him. The world spun in and out of darkness, grainy and muted. “Hannah, I’m sorry—“

He hardly noticed the burn of the blade pressing into his thigh as he forced himself up onto his knees, dragging her head into his arms. The deep laceration in the side of her neck seemed to pulse with every beat of her rapid heart. Her eyes were open wide, staring, mouth moving without sound.

The betrayal on her paling face was unmissable.

“I’m sorry,” Dream breathed. Her bloody hands came up, raking lines down his face with her nails. He hardly felt the pain. “Hannah, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Blood pooled around them in a dark circle. Did wounds always bleed so much so quickly? Dream could have sworn he saw it spurting. “I didn’t want to do this.”

The only sound Hannah seemed able to make was a low, breathy gurgle. Her vines moved about them like dying snakes, unable to tighten enough to pierce his skin. Her eyes rolled backwards,

then fell closed. Dream bent down and pulled her to his chest.

With her final scraps of energy, Hannah struggled against him.

Dream held her until she went still.

For a moment, they sat there in silence, the world heavy on Dream's shoulders. *You'll always be my friend, Hannah. Even if I wasn't yours.*

Sapnap burst around the corner, breaking him from the iron grip of his grief. "That fucking dragon's back!" He yelled. "It's after George!"

His expression changed as he took in the sight before him. Dream looked down at himself, at the blood covering his hands and arms and every inch of his clothing that he could see. His and hers — mostly hers. "Are you hurt?" He said, wide-eyed.

"She's dead," was all Dream could force out. "Where's Techno? Where are the boys?"

Sapnap darted closer, pulling Dream to his feet. Hannah slid limply off him, landing in her own blood with a dull, wet *thud*. "Tommy and the boys are teleporting all over the place or something. Techno's trying to keep Nikki from slaughtering us all. The dragon's gone fucking crazy. *More* crazy. We need to get there, now."

When Dream's feet didn't move, Sapnap squeezed his hand in desperation. "Come on, dude. She was a fucking Eretian. You had to kill her."

"She was my friend."

"*I'm* your friend. George is your friend, or more, or— whatever. Tommy and his kid friends are your friends. You have to focus on us right now."

Dream wiped some of the blood off his face with a clean patch of his sleeve. "I just..." He whispered, but his brain went fuzzy. "Where's my axe?"

Sapnap dashed behind him, then pressed the blood-covered blade into his hands. "Don't make Phil lead another funeral. Let's all get home safe."

She had to die. It was either me or her. There was a sour taste on Dream's tongue. Pushing down the guilt rearing its way through his chest was harder than he would have liked to admit.

Nobody else dies today.

~

George was sure he was going to die.

He'd tried to stay out of sight. With Tommy gone in search of his friends, it was easy to slip between the hedges and bushes and skitter his way across the garden. With a blood-covered sword tucked into his belt, he'd managed to make his way back to the courtyard with the ruined fountain before feeling the excruciation of Dragon's Breath hot against his neck. Techno, as hard as he may have tried, couldn't distract the dragon long enough for him to meet back up with Sapnap and Dream.

That led him to where he was now. He hoped they were at least *aware* of his shit predicament.

The dragon's condition had considerably worsened during its futile cat-and-mouse with

Technoblade. By the time it came rocketing back over the castle roof in a furious bee-line, the fleshy membrane of its wings had begun burn away in several large patches. Its talons were red, raw, dripping spatters of blackened blood wherever it flew. When it landed, arching its back to hiss like a rabid cat, George could have sworn its spine tore through the flesh between its rotting wings, baring the bone to the sunlight.

The rapid decay of its body did nothing to quell its vigour to end George's life as fast as it could.

“Go—“ George swung the sword out in front of him in a wide arc. “Get *back* . Stay the fuck away from me.”

The dragon ambled forward, lips curled back. Its cloudy eyes reminded George of Eret — they had the same lifeless stare. It struck forward, shuddering as a series of hacking coughs overtook its body, and George took the chance to slip by it and sprint into the bushes again. The thorns scraped at his already-ruined clothes, but the pain of all his injuries was muted with his adrenaline, and George was not about to let himself get calm enough for the shock to kick in.

Eret stood alone on a piece of broken fountain in the centre of the courtyard, watching the carnage unfold around them like a theatre in the round. They were still, blank-faced, loose in the wrists and neck as though they were doing no more than listening to a boring scroll be read. George wanted to strangle them. *If I go down, you're going down with me. You and that fucking totem of yours.*

Tubbo and Ranboo appeared at the dragon's side in a burst of purple sparks, howling at the top of their lungs. When the dragon turned, startled, Tubbo struck it in the eye with a small object he held clasped in his palms. The dragon stumbled backwards, roaring in agony, but they were gone long before it could touch them. *You lovely, crazy bastards*, George thought with an exhausted chuckle. *I'll gift all of you netherite swords for keeping me alive.*

The dragon whipped its head around to scan George's direction. One of its eyes was swollen, bleeding. When it couldn't seem to find George after a few moments, it roused what remained of its wings and tipped its head to the sky in frustration.

Find and kill him, you stupid beast. George could practically hear Eret's voice bouncing around in the dragon's skull. *He can't hide forever. Get this over with.*

“Hey!” A sizeable rock flew from the brush on the dragon's opposite side and whacked it in the flank. “Look over here, you stupid reptile!”

George's heart skipped a beat. Dream moved into sight, dancing from foot to foot. He was drenched in blood from neck to toe, but George couldn't see any wounds on him. He lifted his axe, equally drenched, and brought it down hard against the dragon's tail. The bone crunched, sickeningly wet. The dragon jolted as if struck by lightning. The triumphant look on Dream's face fell as the dragon whirled around and bit clean through the small tree at his side, sending splinters of wood shooting in every direction. He swung at the beast as it stepped forward to strike and the dragon's teeth met the flat side of the axe with a resounding twang . In a single motion, the dragon ripped the axe from Dream's hands and sent it flying from sight.

No. Gods, no. George was standing before he knew it, sword clutched tightly in his hand. *It'll kill him. He can't fight back.*

He could see Sapnap's figure limping closer, knife in hand, but he wouldn't reach Dream in time. Neither would Technoblade, high in the sky, dragging Nikki along the castle walls. Ranboo and Tubbo had a chance, perhaps, but they'd just be swallowed whole as well.

Dream raised his hands in fists, hardening his features until the fear was lost beneath the steel.
You're a fighter to the end. I love you for that.

George stepped into the open. His ankles were burning, the small of his back a pulsing patch of raw pain. "Hey!" His voice was so loud it barely felt like his own. The dragon froze in place, then turned its head to the side. Its one uninjured eye focused on him, unblinking. George raised his arms and cried, "Come and get me!"

Dream's face dropped. The dragon's ears went flat. It reared with a piercing roar, and with the rest of the strength remaining in its dying body, galloped towards him at full speed.

George let his sword fall from his fingers, then *ran*.

Each step he took boomed in his ears. His lungs were on fire. He could hear the dragon getting closer, closer with each moment. *It can't catch me too soon.* George willed his exhausted body to go faster. By some miracle, it did. He made a wide arc around the courtyard, past the ruined flowers and eradicated trees, and focused his eyes on the sole figure still standing.

Eret didn't get the sense to try and run until George was already upon him.

"What are you—" Eret grabbed at George's arms and tried to wrench them off him, but his hold was too strong. "Get off me! Stop!"

In their fear and their haste, they wrenched themselves sideways, off the piece of broken quartz and onto the grass. George let himself be dragged along with them, but he did not let go. They stumbled together, back to chest, but remained on their feet. The dragon advanced on them in a dark blur; it couldn't have stopped if it wanted to. Only then did Eret dare to scream.

The dragon's head turned sideways, then George was looking down the length of its throat, its jaws open like blood-stained double doors. He closed his eyes. Time seemed to slow.

Checkmate.

A position from which a king cannot escape.

The dragon's jaws snapped shut on both of them.

Chapter End Notes

:]

King George

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Dream went to scream, he found his lungs had no air.

The dragon shuddered as Tommy swung a sword through its throat, severing its head in a single swipe. The body slumped sideways, the remains of its bones snapping under their own weight with a single crackling hiss, and caved into itself until nothing remained but a pile of bone fragments and ash.

The head — because apparently the gods believed Dream had not suffered enough —remained intact. Tommy threw his hands upon either jaw and tried to force them open, but he was barely able to move them more than an inch or two. “George!” He shrieked. He pulled his hands back, wiping globs of blood on his pants, then returned to his futile efforts. Technoblade landed behind him, ghostly silent, and swept Tommy up into his arms. He was wide-eyed, pale, his pink hair unbound and falling down his back in bloody tangles. Tommy’s screams and pleads to not be taken away seemed to go right through him, unheard.

George... looked peaceful.

Dream’s legs gave way beneath him and he fell to his knees in the blood-soaked dirt, close enough to smell the stench of rot wafting from the dragon’s mouth. “George?” He whispered. “George? Can you hear me?”

George’s head lolled to the side and Dream caught it in his hand, pulling it gently upright. George and Eret were leaned into each other, forced together in a demented bear hug. Two of the dragon’s massive fangs — the only two left, it seemed — had gored through both of their stomachs. From what Dream could see of their tangled legs, several of the smaller teeth had torn into their thighs as well. Eret fell forward over the dragon’s jaw, tucking their arms up against their chest, and went still.

“George?” Dream leaned in, cupping George’s face in his hands. His hands were shaking. When had they begun shaking? “Stay with me, you idiot. Keep breathing. Keep looking at me.”

A shiver rolled up George’s back and he coughed, splattering blood against Dream’s face. Dream wanted to be sick. “Come on, Geor—“ his voice cracked— “George. You can’t let yourself go into shock. You’ll die.”

“Fucking—“ George shifted slightly, only to jolt back into stillness as his face blanched with pain. “Fucking *ow* .”

A laugh escaped Dream’s throat. It tasted of rotten desperation. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why’d you do this?”

“I—“ George gritted his teeth. “Dragon dead?”

“That’s not what’s fucking important right now!” Dream tightened his grip on either side of George’s face. “Don’t get all loopy on me, George! You can’t do that!”

George raised a hand and reached for him. The cold pads of his fingers traced lines up Dream’s arms. *I know this kind of bleeding*, Dream thought in despair. *He’s got minutes left.*

“Dream,” George murmured. “I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt that much when I’m not moving.”

“It doesn’t hurt because you’re in shock.” Dream looked around. There was so much blood on the ground that it made him nauseous. “I need something—” His vision suddenly doubled as tears gathered on his waterline — “I need something to keep him warm. A cape, or sweater — something. Anything.”

“The boys,” George said. “Where are the boys?”

“They’re fine. They’re all here.” Technoblade passed his thick vest into Dream’s waiting hands and he threw it over George’s shoulders. “Come on, I need more shit. He’s going to get cold.”

When nobody moved, Dream brought his fists down hard upon his knees. “Come on, people! Don’t just fucking stand there!”

“Dream.” Sapnap put a hand on his shoulder. “Stop.”

Dream flinched away. *This can’t be happening.* “Stop it! Everyone, just be fucking quiet!”

Nikki stumbled up to them, holding the torn remains of her sleeve to her bleeding arm. She seemed to trip on nothing and flopped to her knees, mouth moving without sound. Dream wanted to slap her. “Don’t fucking sit down,” he spat. “Go get stuff for health potions. *Now!*”

She looked at him for a moment as though he’d spoken to her in another language. Then she stiffened, rose to her trembling feet, and took off in a sprint with both princes and Ranboo following at her heels. Dream turned back to George, whose eyes had fallen closed, and couldn’t stop himself from cracking his palm across his clammy cheek. “Ow!” George mumbled. “Don’t hurt me like that.”

“Don’t close your eyes, then. You have to stay lucid.” Dream looked down at the mess of his and Eret’s torsos. “Technoblade, help me. We’ve got to get him out of here.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Technoblade said gruffly. “Those teeth move at all and they’ll be bled dry in under a minute. They have to stay still.”

“We can’t keep him like this!” Pressure began to mount behind Dream’s eyes. “We have to get him out!”

“We make one mistake and they both die. I’m not risking it.” Technoblade darted around the other side of the dragon’s head and put his hands on Eret’s shoulders. “Sit up,” he commanded, but Eret remained still. Technoblade pulled on them, but Eret refused to pull their arms away from their chest. “Come on. Sit. Up.”

“Don’t touch me,” Eret hissed, bending their head low until their forehead hit the dragon’s cheek. “Get away from me.”

Something glimmered in the shadow of their hidden arms. Dream’s heart came to a stuttering halt. “You—” He grabbed Eret by the hair and yanked his head back. Eret shrieked, blood bubbling on their paling lips, but their arms remained steadfast against their chest. Something was belted to one of them with two thick strips of black leather. “Give me that. *Give* —”

The leather came away with two snaps and the muffled crack of Eret’s wrist. Dream fell back on his heels, holding the totem in his shaking hands. The weight of it in his hands was foreign yet so, so awfully familiar. “No!” Eret barked. Clutching their broken hand, they tipped their head back and gasped out a wordless cry of agony. Dream could have almost felt bad for them.

Almost.

“Hold this.” Dream pressed the totem into George’s hands. It slipped from his fingers. “George. Fucking *hold* it.”

George shook his head, furrowing his eyebrows. “No. Not fair.”

“What the fuck do you mean it’s not fair?” Dream practically forced the totem into George’s hand again, and when George’s fingers refused to tighten, laced their fingers together to keep it from falling. “This’ll save you!”

“No.” George pulled it from Dream’s palm and clutched it between his hands for a moment, panting as if he’d just lifted a great weight. To Dream’s surprise, he leaned forward, pressing his face into Eret’s shoulder, and held the totem out in reach of both of them. “Both of us. Both of us.”

“What?” Eret and Dream said in unison.

“If we die at the same time—“ Another shudder wracked George’s body— “The totem will help us both.”

“You’re— you’re the reason we’re in this situation,” Eret spat. “You *did* this.”

“I had to end the fight.” George coughed. The sound was wet. “But we can both be saved. We can both live.”

“Die. All of you. Die.” Eret grabbed the totem and pulled it back to their chest, dragging George’s arm along with them. “Nikki, kill them. Kill them all.”

“She’s gone to get potion stuff, idiot,” Dream said sharply. “Take our offer. If we can find some way to get both of your hearts to stop at once, then we’ll—“

“I do not need your mercy.” Globes of bloody saliva dribbled down Eret’s chin. “I’ll destroy all of you. I’ll raze your kingdoms to ash.”

“Can’t do that if you’re dead,” George murmured. “Dream’s strong enough to snap your neck. Right before my heart stops, he’ll kill you and—“

“You will not be touching me. I will not allow it.” Eret said. “Go to hell. All of you.”

This maniac’s lost his mind. “We’re trying to save your life!” Dream cried in frustration. “You’ll die if we don’t try this!”

Ranboo teleported back to them, holding a potion stand and a few bottles of glimmering liquid in his hands. Nikki and the other boys followed closely behind him. “I’ve got some health potions!” He said breathlessly. “They’ll help!”

“Stay there and start making more,” Dream ordered. “Eret, put aside your ego for a second and—“

Eret lunged forward as far as they could go and raked their nails down Dream’s face. A rush of blood came streaming from their mouth, but they ignored it. “Don’t tell me what to do, forest dog. I’ll have you drowned. I’ll pluck out both your eyes and make you—“

A rush of dizziness seemed to overtake them and they went silent for a moment, eyes fluttering. Their broken hand tightened on the totem, weakly trying to pull it from George’s hands. “Nikki,” They coughed, watching her figure grow nearer. “Kill them all. Get me my totem.”

Nikki's eyes filled with hopeless tears. "I can't! I'm alone here!"

"I do not permit you to surrender!" Eret said furiously. "Do it, you snivelling coward!"

Nikki made a choked noise and rose to her feet with a knife in hand almost robotically, but one pointed glare from Sapnap sent her back to her knees again. "Your Highness, I can't! Look how many of them there are!"

"Nikki!" Eret swung their hand out as if trying to attack her with a dagger. "All these years, and now, *now* you betray me. I'll have you banished."

Nikki scrunched her eyes closed and forced a piece of glistening melon into one of the bottles. "You don't mean that."

"I do. I considered you my best knight, and now—" Eret gasped, then shuddered— "You fall victim to cowardice. Pathetic."

"Even I know when a battle is hopeless, Your Highness." Nikki's voice went sharp with bitterness. At who, Dream wasn't sure. "I have no plans on dying for nothing today."

Desperation looked so foreign on Eret's paling face. They bared their teeth, spitting blood. "So you abandon me, then. I see how it is."

The hand George had on the totem suddenly went limp, and Eret yanked the totem to their chest. Dream felt a rush of panic and rage. "Give that back!" He snapped, cracking a fist against Eret's cheek. Eret groaned, low in their throat, but their grip on the small item was surprisingly strong. When Dream tried to take it from them, they bent down and bit at his hand.

"If I die," Eret whispered as Dream yanked his hand away. "He's coming down with me."

In a single motion, Eret stuck his hand in a tiny gap between two of the dragon's teeth and forced the totem through. It clattered to the front of the dragon's jaw, hidden out of sight at Eret's side. They licked their bloody lips in grim satisfaction. "Care to give us our final aether rights?"

Fury struck Dream like a bolt of lightning. "You —" He found his hands around Eret's neck, squeezing, slipping in the trails of blood and saliva. Eret only grinned. "You fucking monster—"

A hand clamped down on his shoulder and pulled him back with enough force to send Dream sprawling. "You kill him yourself, and our kingdoms go to war. Just ignore him," Sapnap barked. He tried to stick his arm through, but it was barely big enough to get his wrist through. Not even Tommy's bony arms were thin or bendy enough to reach. "Keep an eye on George. Technoblade and I are going to try and break through some of the teeth."

Oh, gods. Help me. Please. Dream flipped back to his knees and shuffled to George's side. He was limp, pale, awkwardly propped up on his elbows to keep his back from arching back too far. Dream looped an arm around the back of his shoulders and allowed his shaking body to lean into him. "George," He whispered into his hair. "You can't pass out on me yet. Not until we get that totem back."

"I want to lay down," George replied softly. His words were ever so slightly slurred. "My head hurts. I'm cold."

"I know you are." Dream grabbed his hand and pressed it into the crook of his neck and shoulder. "Am I warm? Does that help?"

“Mmhhh.” George lapsed into silence, his breathing shallow and rhythmic. “My eyes are so heavy.”

He jolted as Sapnap smashed his fist into the interlocking grid of the dragon’s remaining teeth. None of them moved. Sapnap tried again, grunting as his flesh made impact, but the teeth barely wobbled. “They’ve atrophied,” Eret sang gleefully. “The muscles around them have atrophied because the dragon is fucking dead and they won’t move a single fucking inch no matter how hard you try—“

“Shut it!” Sapnap said. “Technoblade, you try now.”

“Don’t move the head too much!” Dream pushed a hand against George’s back as another jolt sent him falling again. A low groan escaped George’s lips, carried past Dream’s ears by the rapidly cooling air around them. It would be night soon. They wouldn’t even have the sunlight to help them.

George wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Dream?” George’s fingers tapped his cheek. Dream hadn’t realized his eyes had fallen shut. “Dream, if I die—“

“You *won’t* die.” Dream’s voice came out harsher than he wanted it.

“I said *if*, idiot. *If* I die,” George continued. Every word that exited his mouth seemed to sap more energy from him. “I want you and Sapnap to... go somewhere. Do something. See a beach... or some shit. Something.”

“I can’t say I’d enjoy a vacation much if you were dead, George.” Dream forced back the sob bubbling in his throat. “And I’m not much of a traveller, anyway. I’ve barely been anywhere while not on a knights’ round or something.”

“That’s why I’d want you to go. Find a pretty thing to go and see.” George’s eyes closed. Dream shook him, but they didn’t open again. “Go... make a memory. You two deserve it.”

His head flopped back limply. “George?” Dream said. He grasped George’s face in his hands and slapped his cheek with his fingers. George’s only response was the slight furrowing of his eyebrows. He didn’t even groan. *Not now. Not now.* “Ranboo, give me a potion.”

Ranboo pressed an open bottle into his hands and he tipped it down George’s half-open mouth without a second thought. “Drink it,” he ordered, though not even sure if George could hear him. “I just need you to hold on for a couple more minutes.”

George shuddered violently, drops of pinkish liquid bubbling over his lips. He coughed a mouthful of potion into Dream’s face, screwed up his face in pain, then coughed again. Every movement of his chest sent more blood spilling down the dragon’s jaw, into the flooded grass growing sticky beneath their knees. “Don’t give him any more unless absolutely necessary,” Technoblade snapped as he drove his heel into the dragon’s teeth. “If his bones mend around that fang, it won’t be fun for him.”

“It’s better than him dying!”

“Having to rip a dragon fang from his ribcage will kill him too, Dream! And we’ve only got one totem!” Technoblade knelt down and wiggled one of the smaller fangs with his hand. “Sapnap, this one’s got a crack in it. Keep going!”

“George?” Dream leaned in until their foreheads were touching. “Come on, George. Don’t do this to me now.”

“He’s dead!” Eret cackled. Their pallid skin stretched tightly over their bones as they grinned. “He’s dead. He’s dead. He’s—“

Dream bashed his elbow into their nose and they collapsed forward, shaking so wildly with their laughter that the dragon’s entire head vibrated along with them. Nikki pulled back from her place over the potion stand and sat back, still as a corpse, watching them with both disgust and rapt fascination.

George. George, George, George. “I told you to stay awake for me. You have to wait until we get the totem back.” Dream searched for one of George’s hands and found it tucked against his abdomen, slick with blood. His skin was icy. “Don’t do this to me. I told you it would kill me.”

The growing sting in Dream’s chest threatened to choke the air from his lungs as he pulled George’s hand to his cheek, shaping his limp fingers against the curve of his jaw. “Come on, now,” he whimpered. “You can’t give up on me so soon.”

How dare you be blaming him for this. His organs are in pieces, held within him by a dragon fang. Dream closed his eyes and let a tear slip free. It traced the line of George’s thumb, pooling at the base of his wrist. *He’s in agony and you know it. Let him pass out.*

“George!” Sapnap shrieked. “Come on, George! Stay awake!”

The dragon’s head shook with the force of his blows as Sapnap dove his fist into the cracked dragon tooth over and over. “George!” He screamed, with all the power Dream didn’t have. “You can do this!”

He let out an anguished cry just as the dragon’s tooth snapped inwards, crumbling to pieces as he pulled his limp hand from the hole he’d made. “Technoblade!” Was all he was able to force out. Two of his fingers hung from odd angles, purpling beneath the skin. “I got it!”

Dream felt his breathing go quick and shallow. “George,” he whispered. Desperation clawed at the inside of his ribs like a caged animal. “They’re getting the totem for you. Hang on for a minute more.”

He ran his thumb over George’s lips, pushing them slightly open to feel the warmth of his breath, but nothing met his fingertip but the frigidity of his skin. Terror was quick to seize him. “George? George?” He pushed his thumb up under his nose. Nothing. “Sapnap, he’s not breathing!”

“Because he’s dead!” Eret’s cold fingers attached themselves to his arm, climbing up the fabric like a spider. “He’s dead. He was weak, and now he’s dead—“

The grating sting of his voice faded into nothing as Dream pressed his face into the crook of George’s neck. Through the layers of sweat and dirt and rot, he still smelled like himself. Of home. “I want you for so many years, and now that I get you, the gods take you from me forever?” *I’m living through my worst nightmare. What kept me from him all these years.* “How’s that fair?”

Technoblade’s hand came free from the dragon’s mouth with a *crack*. The totem glowed in the setting sun. “I got it!” He cried. In a split second, he’d crossed the distance between them and shoved it into George’s chest. “Get his hands on it!”

Dream’s body moved on autopilot. *Like with Wilbur. Curl the fingers.* He wasn’t sure he was breathing at all. He didn’t really care. *Sit back and wait. Wait.*

Wait for nothing to happen.

Anguish seemed to grip him in an iron hold. “George!” He shrieked. “Come on! Don’t do this to me!”

His fingers faltered; the totem slipped. Dream nearly knocked George over with the force of shoving it back into his hands. Seconds passed. Eret’s laughter continued around them like the screeches of a vulture, their searching hands clawing at Dream’s back. *Gods, please. I’ve been good. I’d protect him. I’d love him truly. What more can you want from me?*

He pressed a kiss to George’s cold cheek. Then another, and another, until the tears came too strongly for him to do anything more than collapse into the crook of his shoulder, shuddering. “Please don’t be gone already. That’s not fair.” It was so hard to breathe. “I love you so much.”

A pair of arms circled his waist and squeezed him tightly. It was Tommy, wordlessly crying, gripping him like a lifeline. Dream leaned into him, felt the child’s heartbeat against his back. It was warm. It was alive.

The world burst into violent golden pieces.

~

For a second, Dream was sure the explosion had blinded him for good. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but light, bright and unforgiving. Flashes of colour danced in his peripherals. *Have I died?* He thought wildly. *Did the totem kill me to revive George?*

He blinked once, twice, and the world slid back into focus piece by piece. The dragon’s head, cleanly sliced jaw from jaw, laying charred in the smoking grass. King Eret, wide-eyed and still, face upturned towards the sun with the remnants of a grin still etched into their lifeless features. Sappnap, bent over someone with light spilling from their eyes and mouth and nose.

... light?

Dream pushed himself to his feet. His palms were stinging. His face burned like he’d been scalded. He stumbled forward, feeling his muscles shake with every step. “George?” He said to the air. His vision faded into wild flashes of light once more and he fell forward, expecting the blood-soaked grass to appear beneath his fingers.

What he wasn’t expecting, though, was for someone to catch him in their blazing arms, their skin so gloriously hot it breathed fire into his veins. They pulled him close, pressing Dream’s face to their chest with his legs still awkwardly half-bent beneath him. *George.* Something rushed up Dream’s throat and he leaned into the warmth, gasping, pulling at George’s hair and clothes and whatever he could reach. “George—“ he began. His fingers caught in the gaping hole near the small of George’s back and whatever words he had on his tongue melted away. *You’re back. It worked.* He couldn’t tell if the weight welling in his throat was a laugh or a sob. *It actually worked.*

Moments passed. The light faded away, leaving stars floating in the corners of Dream’s vision. George pulled back, scanning their surroundings as if seeing them for the first time. “Whoa,” he said. There was still light bouncing off the inside of his mouth and his nostrils. “That was weird.”

Dream nodded. “Yeah.” It was all he could think to say. “Yeah, it was.”

Tommy bowled past him and had flung himself into George’s arms faster than Dream could blink. “George!” He wailed. “We thought you were dead! We thought you were dead!”

George leaned his head into the crook of Tommy's shoulder. "Well, I'm not. That's all that matters, right?"

That only made Tommy bawl even harder. Eventually Technoblade swept in to pull them apart and force a whole two health potions down George's throat, but Tommy remained attached to George's side, dripping bloody tears down what remained of his ruined tunic.

Had everyone else been gone, Dream probably would have too.

He managed to tear his eyes from George — living, breathing, warm George — and drew his attention to Eret's body. Nikki sat beside them on her knees, health potion in hand, but the bottle wasn't even uncorked and the look in her eyes made it clear that she hadn't been expecting to save them at all.

"We didn't kill him," Dream said. "You saw us give them a chance, and he was the one to refuse —"

"I know," Nikki hissed. "Shut up for a second."

She closed her eyes and placed her fingertips on Eret's eyelids, gently drawing them closed as she mumbled a familiar prayer under her breath. *Will the gods listen to the final Aether rights of someone like him?* Dream bit his tongue at the rush of hatred that rushed up his throat. *Wherever Wilbur is, I want that monster nowhere near.*

When Nikki was done, she sat back on her heels and looked down at her hands. "You do not get my kingdom," she said simply. "King Eret did not die to your hands, so their kingdom will be passed on to their heir."

Dream started. "King Eret has an heir?"

"Yeah. Me." Nikki pushed herself to her feet, uncorked the health potion, and doused her torn-up arm with it. "I just decided right now."

"That's not how it—" George piped in.

"I don't care. Who's going to stop me? Eret can't banish me from beyond the grave, so they can't dethrone me, either." Nikki straightened her shoulders. "You've taken all I have already. I won't let you take my home as well."

"We're only here because you forced us to be," Dream stepped forward until he and Nikki's noses were almost touching. "I didn't want to kill Hannah, she—"

"Don't speak her name," Nikki snapped.

"It's true! Nobody would have died if you all had just left us alone. Not Wilbur, or Jack, or even Eret himself." He pretended to not hear Tommy's breathing go ragged. "No more of this, now. Leave us be."

Nikki stared at him, and in the passing moment of silence, he took her in. The severe lines of her face, the blazing hatred in her eyes, the jarring gentleness of the colour of her hair. *She can't be older than Sapnap, but eyes like that age a person fifty years.* She turned, outstretched a hand towards Technoblade. "Leave now," she ordered, her voice full of anguish. "You've got what you want. Leave me to my ashes."

Technoblade shook her hand. "Gladly."

“And get your soldiers out of mine and Tubbo’s kingdoms, too,” George added. “I want them gone in two days’ time.”

Nikki pursed her lips. “Fine. Just get out of my sight.”

So they did. Nikki gifted them two horses — the one on which Techno and Tubbo had arrived mere days before, and an old mare with exhaustion written into the corners of her eyes. Dream fetched his axe, stuck halfway into a tree; Sapnap found his set of armour locked in a glass case like a trophy. His mask was nowhere to be found, but they didn’t bother sticking around to look for it any longer than they had to. *No point now, really.* Dream trailed his finger down the neckline of his chestplate, wincing as it pressed into a bruise. *I’m not exactly anonymous anymore.*

They put the boys on one horse, Sapnap on the other. “I can walk,” Sapnap complained. “Let the dude who just came back from the dead ride instead.”

“I don’t have a healing stab wound or a healing broken hand,” George replied. “Comparatively, I’m in the best shape out of all of you.”

“I’m second,” Tubbo piped up, swinging his legs against his horse’s chestnut flanks. “I got revived by a totem too.”

Golden spider veins crept down from his hairline into a tangle on his cheek like the cracks of a mended pot, the skeleton of wounds he wasn’t meant to survive. *Do you have gold marks too?* Dream looked to George, walking beside him with his eyes closed, and resisted the urge to reach out his hand. *Will you look down and be reminded of what you did for us every day?*

They walked in silence to the portal, Nikki following on their heels. She did not wave to them as they passed through one by one, nor did the look of pained defiance leave her features even for a moment. *Queen. Will the Eretian people even accept her? Would they have any choice?* Dream stopped before he walked through and met her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

It didn’t mean *I think I’m in the wrong*, nor did it mean *I wish Eret hadn’t died*. Dream really didn’t know what it meant. He wasn’t even sure what he wanted her to reply. “Go,” was all she said, with all the grief of a woman shackled to a kingdom that had destroyed everyone she loved. Then, as Dream let himself be taken over by the purple mist, she turned, wiped her eye with her sleeve, and walked away.

They were almost an hour into the ride home when Tommy finally said, “What the fuck just happened?”

Tubbo began giggling. The sound was light, exhausted, bewildered in the way they all were but hadn’t realized. “I don’t know!” He said. “I don’t even know!”

He flopped forward onto his horse’s mane, still shaking with laughter, and rubbed his hands over his uneven horns. “That was so cool. Ranboo, like, teleported me around and stuff.”

And you died, Dream thought. *But apparently your priorities are elsewhere. Can’t say I blame you.*

“Are we going to be stopping for the night?” Ranboo asked quietly.

“Probably not,” Technoblade replied. “The ride’s only about twelve hours; we should all be back in the overworld as quick as possible.”

Ranboo looked down at his hands and crinkled his lips. *Poor kid*, Dream thought. *I’m turning into a softie for these idiots.* “No, we should stop,” he said, motioning to George and Sapnap. “None of

us have eaten or slept for at least a day. I doubt Phil will mind if we take a couple hours to give these kids a rest.”

Technoblade turned from his place at the head of the group, frowning, but his expression quickly sunk into reluctant defeat. “Fine,” he said. “But no more than five hours. All of us need to be home.”

“Can we stop now?” Ranboo squeaked. There was a quaver to his voice. “I have to pee really badly.”

“There’s a clearing up ahead; we’ll stop there. I don’t want to get caught by a hoglin in a red forest with nowhere to go.” Technoblade pointed to a clear patch in the trees. “Don’t go too far. I want you within screaming distance if you get jumped.”

Ranboo nodded silently, slipped off the horse’s back, and disappeared in a burst of purple sparks. Technoblade waved Dream closer. “How easily can we take down a hoglin to skin and eat?”

“About as easily as you can make a fire and find roasting sticks.”

“Awesome.” Technoblade clapped. “There’s mushrooms everywhere, too. That should be enough to feed everyone.”

“Nothing to drink?”

“We’ve got some health potions, but that’s it. Yet another reason why I wanted us to be home as soon as possible.” Technoblade gave him a pointed look. “But I understand your worries. I can’t say I’m the most paternal person in the world, so maybe you’re more in touch with what the kids need.”

He turned ahead, staring off at the approaching clearing with what could have been guilt flickering in his dark eyes. “I just thought Ranboo looked weary,” Dream replied. “I don’t think it’s set in for Tommy or Tubbo what’s actually happened.”

“Probably not. They’re too young for all of this.” Technoblade let out a long breath through his nose. “I’m just glad we all got out in one piece. Mostly.”

“Yeah. Thanks for saving our asses. I certainly couldn’t have done it myself.”

“Don’t mention it. You kept Tommy safe when he needed you most. That’s more than I ever did for him.”

Before Dream could reply, Technoblade turned. “We’re stopping here!” He cried to the rest of the group. “Everyone stay near. We’re going to try and find a hoglin to cook up.”

“I’ll look for mushrooms,” George piped in.

“Fantastic. Boys, stay with Sapnap and find some tinder.” Technoblade cocked his finger into the forest. “Dream, you go ahead of me. I’ll get the horses settled.”

“Right on.” Dream pulled his axe from its place on his shoulder. “I’m fucking starving.”

~

“Get that mushroom away from me or I’ll kick you in the balls.”

“You have to eat it. It’s good for you,” Technoblade said, pushing it farther into Tommy’s hands.

“Just put it in your mouth, chew, and swallow. Easy.”

“No!” Tommy chuckled it into the trees and crossed his arms. “I hate mushrooms more than anything else ever.”

Dinner was almost normal. It had been easy to find a hoglin to slaughter, then collect wood and chunks of semi-clean stone to create a makeshift stove. George found a handful of mushrooms and they cooked those too, dousing them with health potion just to watch them explode into multicoloured fireballs. The meat was tasty, wonderfully filling to their empty stomachs, and the smells almost made Dream feel like he was home again, on a mission with the other knights, cooking whatever they could find under the night sky.

Then Dream would look beside him, at the creases beneath George’s eyes and the flash of gold he saw when George lifted his arms up to stretch, and the memories of the day came back in a violent wave.

“Where’s Ranboo?” He asked, overcome with a sudden jolt of panic. “Did he ever come back from the bathroom?”

“Yeah,” Tubbo said, stuffing a mushroom and a dripping slice of meat into his mouth. *Poor kid’s practically starved.* “He just left again a little while ago. Said you told him to go look for more mushrooms.”

Dream passed his makeshift wooden plate into George’s lap. “I did no such thing. What direction did he go?”

“Over there.” Tubbo pointed past the horses. “Don’t be mad at him,” he added quickly. “Maybe he just had to take a shit and was too embarrassed to say.”

“I’m not mad,” Dream said, rising to his feet. “I just want to know where he is. I’ll be back in a second.”

He darted past the nickering horses and into the thickly-wooded red forest. “Ranboo?” He said, just loud enough to hear his voice bounce off the trees. “I don’t remember asking you to get any more mushrooms. We have plenty as is.”

There came no reply, but Dream could tell he was near. “Come on, kid. I know you can hear me. You’re not in trouble.”

“I’m over here,” Came a quivering voice. Dream moved past a particularly thick tree overgrown with vines and found Ranboo curled up against the trunk, face pressed into his knees. “Sorry,” he whispered. He’d been crying. “I didn’t know how else to get away.”

“Oh, Ranboo.” *There it is.* Dream sat down in a patch of crunchy red moss and put a hand on Ranboo’s shoulder. “Are you okay? Have you eaten?”

Ranboo shook his head and sobbed. There were lines of inflammation down his cheeks, bubbling tears hanging at the apex of his chin. “I’m not hungry,” he said. “And I can’t be with everyone right now. I think I’m dying.”

Another sob wracked his lanky body with tremors. “Why isn’t everyone being scared? Why are we normal right now?” He hiccuped. “Why is everyone acting okay?”

“It happens after wars and stuff. There’s so much to deal with — fear and grief, physical pain sometimes — that your body just puts it on a shelf for a little while.” Dream reached out and petted

Ranboo's hair. His ears were remarkably soft. "Trust me, nobody's forgotten about this. They'll start dealing with it eventually, and it won't be pretty."

"I watched Tubbo *die* !" Ranboo's hands grabbed Dream's knee and squeezed until it hurt. "He died right in front of me! I had to watch him! His horns—"

"Oh, kid." Dream pulled him close, pressed his face into his shoulder, and felt him tremble as he sobbed. "That must have been horrible."

"I can't stop thinking about it! And about George, and—" he coughed, gasped, then coughed again — "And Michael, and how he died too, and—"

"I know, I know," Dream murmured. "It's alright, Ranboo. You're so brave."

Ranboo pulled his long legs up against Dream's side until he was tucked beneath his arm. "I don't feel brave. I just want to go to bed. I want someone to make me feel safe."

"We'll keep you safe. You've got me and George, Sapnap and Techno and Phil. You're good with us."

"It's not the same," Ranboo said. "I'm not Tommy or Tubbo. I never got to have parents."

"Phil can become like that to you. His heart is always open. I think he'd adopt me if he could." Dream chuckled. "You won't always feel like this. Battles are frightening, but you get used to them after a while. I did."

Ranboo pulled back, wiping at his eyes with his sleeves. "You promise?"

"Mmhmm. I'll teach you all about it. You'll do great."

"Okay." Ranboo closed his eyes, nodding to himself. "Okay. And... Dream?"

Dream cocked his head. "Yeah?"

"Don't hate Michael for what he did. He couldn't control it."

"Michael? Who—" *Oh.*

Ranboo's voice went quiet, nervous. "Eret made him do what he did. He didn't want to."

"I know," Dream said, but the words came out strangled. Ranboo scooted forward and lay his head on Dream's shoulder. "I know you liked him."

"He was from home," Ranboo said. "He was the only thing I've ever seen that's like me. From that place."

"I know that feeling. Of finding someone just like you—" A weight rose in Dream's throat—"Then losing them."

They let themselves fall silent against the gentle noises of the forest around them. Without any hoglins or piglins nearby, it was almost relaxing. It was some time before Ranboo spoke again, in a voice so quiet Dream almost missed it.

"He wasn't a bad dragon," He said. "He was just a baby."

Dream's chest tightened. He blinked, forcing away the image playing in vivid colour behind his

eyelids, and hefted himself to his feet. "We should get back to camp soon. They'll wonder where we are."

Ranboo looked up at him with shiny eyes. "Do we have to?" He said in a small voice. "I don't want them to see me crying."

"I'll give you somewhere to curl up in private and bring you some food." Dream outstretched a hand and let Ranboo use it to rise to his own shaky feet. "We'll say all the teleporting has given you a migraine. Sound good?"

Ranboo nodded unsurely. "I think so. Thanks."

These kids need to stop affecting me so much. Dream walked him back to camp, holding a hand on his shoulder, and found a patch beneath a half-grown tree that was a decent enough bed with the help of a saddle blanket. Ranboo curled up on his side, still mindlessly picking at the scraps of meat and mushroom on his wooden plate, and closed his eyes. "Can Tommy and Tubbo come sleep near here when they're done?" He whispered.

"Of course," Dream replied. "And us grown-ups will make sure nothing touches you guys."

"You guys have to sleep too!"

"We'll be okay. We're big guys." Dream ran a hand through the boy's mismatched hair. It was fuzzy like an animal's pelt. "Finish your food and sleep, alright? I'll wake you when it's time to go."

"Okay. Thank you, Dream."

When he arrived back at the fire, which had fallen to ashes, he found George alone, propped up against their sitting log, awake and alert. "Dream," he said, "Come sleep."

I don't think I could if I tried. Dream shook his head. "I'm going to patrol for a little while. I need to clear my head."

George frowned. For a moment, they were back on the nether highway, barely even friends, and Dream felt feverish all over again. "What?" He continued. "I'm not tired. I was just hungry."

"Sit." George pointed beside him. "King's orders."

Dream sat, albeit reluctantly, and focused his eyes on the remains of the fire. George moved in his peripherals, a spectre of something he couldn't bear to face head-on, and said nothing as he sidled up against Dream's side and laid his head on his shoulder. "Are you angry with me?" He asked.

"What?" Dream started. "No."

George shifted, drawing himself closer. "You've barely talked to me since we left the Eretian portal."

"There isn't much to talk about."

"There's *everything* to talk about."

"I'm not really in a talking mood."

"Because you're mad at me," George said, as if it were a fact. "I can tell that you are."

“I hate that you even considered saving King Eret,” Dream replied. “Trying to save two people at once would have been far too risky. You could have gotten yourself killed. Why even bother?”

“I wanted them to have an equal shot at living, just like I did. And if they still died, I wanted them to die knowing I wasn’t like them.” George tightened his jaw. “I know you probably think it’s stupid, but it was important to me. I don’t regret what I did.”

Frustration bubbled at the back of Dream’s mouth. “That monster nearly killed all of us. Forgive me if I don’t totally agree with your ‘second chances’ policy.”

“Don’t get snappy with me here,” George said in a low hiss. “The Eretians — or Nikitians, or whatever they’ll be called now — won’t ever mess with us again because of what I did. We proved ourselves.”

“Nothing is worth having to sit there and watch you bleed out in front of me, George. I’d rather be messed with a hundred times than have to go through that again.” Dream cracked his knuckles against the plates of his leg armour. “If you die doing some heroic bullshit, I’ll never forgive you. It’s never worth it.”

George leaned away until he was sitting up, then crossed his arms. “You’d do what I did for me.”

“Because I’m your knight. It’s my job.”

“There we are with that again. You’re not my knight anymore,” George snapped. “I thought we were equals.”

“We are, but you still run a country. I don’t,” Dream replied. *And I’d much rather die than have to live the rest of my sorry life without you*, his brain added silently.

“Thick-headed idiot. We’re not equals if you still think you’re disposable.”

“I don’t think I’m disposable!” Dream threw up his hands in frustration. “I just don’t want you throwing yourself into mortal danger to prove a point!”

“It was a point that had to be made!”

Dream went to stand, but George caught him by the elbow. “You’re not walking away. If you want to be my knight so badly, you can sit here and guard me while I sleep. Sapnap’s already asleep and Techno’s gone with the boys to make sure they don’t die while taking a piss. You don’t need to fucking patrol anything.”

Without another word, George turned away and dropped his head into his arms, tucking his knees up close to his chest. Dream grit his teeth. *You should be on your knees thanking the skies that he’s even here with you, but instead you’re fighting. Great job.*

Dream sat down again, stretched out his legs in front of him, and closed his eyes. *I know I’m an ass, but I can’t help but feel angry, too. Can’t you see I can’t live without you?*

Techno came back after a few minutes, Tommy and Tubbo trailing at his heels in ranging stages of exhaustion, and Dream sent them on their way to Ranboo’s bed with a saddle blanket and a wave. Then they were alone again, silent and apart when Dream wanted to do nothing more than wrap George in his arms and never let go. *Our specialty*, Dream thought, almost fond. *Fighting instead of just talking like normal people.*

He lifted his hand silently, as though the simple noise would make George run away, and laid it on

George's hip. He was warm. So wonderfully warm. "Dream?" George said without moving.

"Yeah?" Dream replied.

"When I was dying, did you tell me you loved me?"

The memory hit him in a painful jab. "Yeah," he said. "I did."

"I heard you."

Dream's throat tightened. "You did?"

George sat up, nodding. "I thought I was dreaming, but I heard all the things you said."

"I thought I'd never have the chance to again." Dream felt his jaw quaver and pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth to keep from crying. "I wasn't even sure if you'd hear me then."

"I did. And I love you too, in case you couldn't tell." George gestured to the two of them and chuckled emptyly. "Maybe you can't, right now. I wouldn't blame you."

Dream grabbed him and yanked him in, pulling every part of him as close as he could. "Just promise me that there won't be any more heroism for the next little while," he murmured. "I don't think I can live without you."

George laughed against him. "You could. You're strong."

"Well I don't fucking *want* to, then."

"Fair enough. The feeling is mutual."

Tears rose in Dream's waterline and dribbled down his cheeks. "We're so stupid," he said with a smile. George pressed the bridge of his nose to Dream's jaw and held himself there, his breath warm against Dream's aching skin. "I'm so happy you're still here."

"I'm happy to be alive. I think I'll stay this way for some time."

"You better."

It's not fixed, Dream thought to himself, once George had gone still and relaxed against his chest. It's going to hit us again. We're going to have to deal with it more. It's going to hit Tubbo and Tommy, Sapnap and Techno. Ranboo's already started the grieving process for someone who's still alive.

But at that moment, mere hours into their healing, hearing Sapnap's distant snores and feeling George sleep against him was enough.

Tomorrow, they'd be home again.

Chapter End Notes

ahhh... the fundamental difference between King Eret and King George: where George is strong for others, Eret is strong only for themselves.

y'all we are in the final stretch! 2-3 chapters left! omg!!!! I'm losing my mind lmao. I've started working again alongside this and my internship so I'm mentally dying but I DID IT

to say that this climax scared me was an understatement. Y'all have been with me for so long and I'm afraid of letting you guys down when it means the most. Don't worry; there are still more things to come in these last final chapters, so don't be discouraged if something you want to see isn't in here! I really hope you enjoyed this chapter. 7500 words of pain, babeyyyy

also, if you don't mind, Rec me SBI foster aus or DNF break up-make up/romantic angst with a happy ending in the comments. I need more stuff to read. Share the clout! this community is so talented and I love you all <3

please let me know what y'all thought of this hdkshdkd

-Ophelia

Child Of Wonder

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What are you doing back here?”

Tommy looked up. Techno stood beside him, staring down at him with hard, inquisitive eyes. He shrugged. “I told Tubbo and Ranboo that I wanted to be alone for a while.”

“Did you fight with them?” Techno asked, turning ahead to look at their backs. Their group trekked on ahead of them in near silence, too tired to make conversation. Sapnap was leaned over his horse’s back, fast asleep, with Dream and George walking on either side of him. Tubbo and Ranboo sat pressed close to one another, swaying with the gentle motions of their horse’s gait, lost in a quiet conversation Tommy hadn’t been able to keep up with.

Not jealous, he thought. *My head’s just all fucked up*. “No. I just wanted, you know—” He waved his hands by the sides of his head— “Brain space and shit.”

“Brain space.” Techno nodded as if he understood. “Why don’t we go up to the front of the group? It’s safer.”

Tommy shook his head. “I like it back here.”

Fine,” Techno sighed. “But I’m staying back here with you. I’d rather not have you be scooped up by a piglin while my back is turned.”

Tommy scowled. *Your stick-up-ass-ness is going to ruin my thinking mood*.

He really wasn’t in much of a thinking mood at all. Thinking meant thinking about Wilbur (which was really quite the horrible thing to think about, considering he was dead) or thinking about Tubbo’s revival (which *should* have been happy, but really just left him with a weird, uncomfortable tightness in his stomach. He wasn’t sure why.), and he couldn’t think of any good or nice things to think about because he was so tired. He was tired of talking, tired of walking, and he wanted nothing more than to...

Well, he wasn’t sure *what* he wanted to do at all. He hated being on the road, walking for hours in silence, but the thought of going home and having to somehow restart his life in that castle without Wilbur seemed equally detestable. He’d have to be near Wilbur’s empty room, all the toys they used to play with, the seat at the dinner table across from him that would always be empty. *It’s not home anymore. It’s like when I moved in*. Tommy wrapped his arms around himself and shivered with the non-existent breeze. *Just a big scary castle full of people who don’t know me*.

“Tommy?”

Tommy blinked, then scowled. Techno had moved closer to him in the moment he’d been distracted. “What?”

Techno outstretched his wing as if inviting him to come closer. Tommy remained where he was. “When we get back home,” Techno started. “Things’ll be different.”

“Did you bury Wilbur without me?” Tommy said immediately. He pinched his eyes shut and dug his nails into the palms of his hands. “Nevermind. Don’t tell me.”

“We put him in the mausoleum. With Mum.” The softness of grief lay heavy on Techno’s words. The tips of his feathers tapped at Tommy’s shoulder, beckoning him closer. “You can go visit him whenever you want.”

Tears welled in Tommy’s eyes until a kaleidoscope of Tubbos and Ranboos and horse butts swirled before him. “I can’t see him?” He blinked them away, willing the world to right itself once more, but more appeared where the old ones fell. *I can’t see him ever again until the end of time and I’ll never ever look at his face again or hear him or touch him or—*

“No. It wouldn’t be smart to, at this point. I don’t think you’d like what you’d see.”

Don’t think about what he means by that. Tommy winced, then forced himself to breathe until his throat cleared enough to speak. “You weren’t supposed to do it without me.”

Techno frowned. “We *had* to.”

“No. It’s only been a few days.” Tommy wrapped his wings around himself and buried his streaming eyes into his feathers. “You could have waited.”

“It’s been way more than a few—“ Techno pinched the bridge of his nose— “What, should we have just popped him in the icebox for a few days with the lamb legs and preserves? Waited until you came back? We didn’t know when that would be!”

“Shut up!” Tommy screamed. Dream turned back to look at them, one eyebrow raised. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Go away!”

His fingers itched to grab a handful of Techno’s stupid black feathers and rip them straight out. He wanted to kick, to scream, to bite down on something until his jaw burned and his gums bled and every cut on his body opened up again. “Fuck off.” He scrubbed at his face with his hands until his scabbing cuts stung. “Fuck off right now.”

Techno grabbed him by the elbow and yanked him to a halt. “What the fuck are you doing?” He hissed, wiping blood off Tommy’s hands. “You’re bleeding all over now.”

“I don’t care! Go away!” Tommy turned to run after the group, but Techno’s grip on him was firm. “We’re falling behind! Let me go!”

“We’ll fly back to them to catch up. You stay here for a second and calm down.” Techno looked up, gave Dream a curt wave. “Sit down.”

“You’re not Wilbur!” Tommy said, batting his hands away as they went to push down on his shoulders. “Stop trying to be Wilbur! Stop trying to convince me that you give a shit about me!”

Techno’s face twisted. “I have *always* given a shit about you,” He said with a snarl.

“Oh! I should just take your word for it, then?” Tommy collapsed against the nether highway’s raised edge and pulled his knees to his chest. “Because it never fucking felt like it.”

“I loved you just as much as Wilbur did, okay?” Techno snapped. “And just as much as Dad did. I just showed it differently.”

“No, no you didn’t! If you did, you wouldn’t be standing here being all defensive and shit!” Tommy pressed his eyes into his knees. The concrete beneath him was warm. He wanted to sleep. “You couldn’t even begin to love me as much as he did. Not even close.”

Techno fell silent, and the anger radiating off him softened to something that might just have been guilt. “Wilbur loved me like Dad loved you,” Tommy continued. His top lip felt tingly. “He was always... *there*. You and Dad weren’t.”

“I didn’t know how to be,” Techno said in a low voice. “I couldn’t understand you.”

“Because I was bad, I know.” *Please, Wilbur. Just come back.* “I’m reminded of that every single fucking day.”

A ghaist wailed in the distance, raising the hairs along Tommy’s arms. *Fuck.* All he wanted was to be home. Home with Wilbur. Home without the smell of blood in his nose or the memory of death imprinted onto the backs of his eyelids, replaying over and over no matter how hard he tried to think of something else. “I know I’m shit and awful, okay? Just shut up about it.”

“That’s not what I meant. I wasn’t trying to insult you.”

“And Wilbur wasn’t *trying* to die, but look where we are now.”

Techno breathed a long sigh through his nose. “Come on,” he murmured, reaching out a hand. “We should catch up to the rest of the group.”

“I just sat down,” Tommy moaned. “Now my legs feel all weak and achey.”

“I can carry you.” Techno kneeled, pulling Tommy closer, and swept him back into his arms before he could form the words to refuse. “You just rest.”

Tommy wiped a glob of blood from his nose on Techno’s shirt. He smelt of sweat, rot, exhaustion. Tommy didn’t even want to *think* about how much he himself probably stank. Sighing, he let his head fall to rest on Techno’s shoulder, close enough to his skin for the smell of home to bleed through, and focused his eyes on a lock of pink hair bouncing off Techno’s wing. *It feels nice to be picked up again.* The anger in his chest settled; he felt himself relax. *I like being picked up.*

Techno wasn’t much taller than Wilbur, but he had more muscle in one wing than Wilbur had in his entire body. He carried Tommy like he weighed nothing, stared ahead like he’d forgotten he was there. Tommy leaned more into him, craving warmth despite the sweat running down his neck, but Techno made no move to bring him closer.

Instead, he spoke.

“I can’t be Wilbur.”

Tommy shut his eyes. “I don’t want you to be Wilbur. I never said I wanted—”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Techno’s hand flattened against the small of his back, as much a warning as it was a comfort. “I know I’ll never be what he was to you. Neither can Dad.”

The iron grip of grief wrapped Tommy’s throat in its claws and squeezed until his breathing went ragged. “I can’t be him,” Techno continued, “But I can be a better me. I can... be there.”

Please do. No, don’t. Stay away and never leave me alone ever again. Tommy pressed his eyes into the fabric of Techno’s shirt and sobbed. He cried until he was gasping, shaking, red-faced and puffy-eyed and dripping grief from his every pore. The constant rhythm of Techno’s footsteps quickened, then stopped altogether as his wings opened in a flurry of darkness and shot the two of them into the air. “I’m sorry,” Techno whispered over the wind. “I’m so sorry.”

Tommy could only cling to him in reply.

They landed; the impact of Techno's feet hitting the ground jolted Tommy's aching bones. Scowling, he turned his head and wiped his dribbling nose on Techno's shoulder. "Oh," came Dream's voice. "Techno, he's bleeding. And crying."

"I know," Techno replied simply. "He's alright, though. Just resting."

Gods, Tommy could *hear* Wilbur in his words, stretched awkwardly over Techno's impersonal coolness like an ill-fitted glove. Still, it made his chest tighten. *Don't go back on this*, he begged internally, curling his fingers in Techno's feathers. *I can't lose this twice. Don't give me this and then leave me alone again.*

"Ah." Dream coughed. "How much longer in this place?"

"Shouldn't be more than three hours, now."

Tommy opened his eyes. Dream stood beside him, holding Sapnap's sleeping face in one hand to keep him from sliding off their horse's side. "Hey," he said softly, lifting his scarred lips into a smile. "How are you feeling?"

It was still odd to see his face without the mask, but he was less ugly than Tommy remembered. Maybe it was because he was trying to look friendly. "I'm okay," Tommy replied. "I want to be home."

"Me too." Dream kicked a stray rock and they watched it bounce against the sides of the highway. "George and I will be going back to our own home pretty soon. We haven't been back there in months."

"I don't want you guys to go." Tommy reached out his hand and Dream ducked under it, letting Tommy rest his fingers in his hair. "It's more fun when you're around."

"Oh, we'll be back. And there's always letters, right?"

Tommy patted Dream's head and frowned. "I can't write."

"I'll teach you," Techno piped in. "That can be our thing."

Our thing. Wilbur hadn't even been able to teach him to write. That, to Tommy, meant it was all but impossible. "Okay," he said hesitantly. "Don't be a dickhead about it though."

"I won't. I promise." Techno's grip on him tightened, and for a moment, Tommy could have almost considered it a hug.

He closed his eyes again and leaned into it too.

~

"Technoblade!"

Phil? George's eyes snapped up. Phil stood over the crest of the upcoming hill, flanked by several Antarctic Empire guards. He threw a hand in the air and laughed so loudly it was more a whoop of joy. "Tommy!" His wings opened with a whoosh and he was on them in the blink of an eye, showering the red bricks beneath their feet with white feathers. "Oh gods — Tommy, *Tommy* —"

Tommy jumped at the sound of his name, then practically threw himself from his brother's hip and

into his father's waiting arms, gasping as though he'd been drowning. Phil stumbled back, grasping at Tommy's back with shaking hands, and buried his face in his son's hair. "Oh, thank the gods. You're all alright." He looked up at them with tear-filled eyes and grinned. "You're all alive. You're all alive!"

Sort of. Pins and needles burst in George's stomach. He tried to ignore it. "We're fine," he said, leaning into Phil's shoulder for a quick hug as he tugged him near. "But King Eret is dead. It seems one of their knights wants to take over the throne."

Phil's face hardened. "We'll talk about that later. I want all of us home as quick as possible. I've got carriages waiting."

The rest of the ride back to the Antarctic Empire passed quick after that. Phil and the knights hustled them into carriages, forcing water bottles and health potions down their throats, and had set off at a brisk trot before George's head had stopped spinning. He ended up stretched out on one of the carriage seats, arms wrapped around himself, trying to offset the looming realization of what had happened to him until he had some privacy. He'd already *died* in front of his friends — he'd at least like to break down about it alone, thank you very much.

But he wasn't alone. They had hours left of travel, then hours of explaining to Phil what the *fuck* had just happened to all of them and how the *fuck* they were supposed to go on from it. They had to eat, drink, get every ounce of blood and grime scrubbed from their skin before they could go on existing as normal. George was sure he'd bite anyone who even dared to look at his stomach — he hadn't even mustered the courage to *touch* it, let alone lay his eyes on the remnants of a fatal goring. Seeing the golden mess that had become of Tubbo's face had been enough to send his brain into a tailspin and thinking about it for more than a few seconds only made his gut wrench. *I feel sick*, George thought, pressing his aching eyelids into the cushion beneath him. *Something feels off.*

The carriage rolled to a stop, then the door opened with a squeak. "George?" Said Technoblade, poking his head in. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

George rubbed at his eyes. "Come in."

"I'd rather you be alone."

Beside him, George felt Dream stiffen. George laid a hand on his knee as he forced himself to sit up, squeezing it in a piss-poor attempt to be comforting. "Yep," he grumbled. "Forgive me, I'm a little tired."

Technoblade reached out a hand and helped him down the carriage steps, then shut the door behind them. "I won't be long," he said, waving to the carriage driver to go, "And I'll fly us back if we get left behind. I just thought..." he trailed off, lips pursed uncomfortably. "I need to tell you something about your... new condition."

George felt a chill down his back. "The revival?"

Technoblade nodded. "I've studied revivals before. They're rare, so research is scarce, but there are some things you should know."

The health potion George had been made to drink tingled in his stomach, searching for a wound that wasn't there. *I'd feed Sapnap to some hoglins for some tea right now*. "Yeah?" He said, swallowing his dread. "Tell me."

Technoblade cracked his knuckles. There was a dark spot on his shoulder where Tommy's blood

had dried onto his tunic. “Well,” he began. “The body remembers death. We don’t really realize most of the time, given how... you know, we aren’t supposed to *survive* death, but it imprints onto the body’s physical memory. There are some complications with that.”

George’s mouth was dry. “Complications?”

“Your body knows you shouldn’t have survived what you did. It knows that it died, at least for a second, and will always be trying to return to the state you should naturally be in right now.” Technoblade chuckled humourlessly. “Dead.”

“Are you saying my body is trying to *kill* me?”

“No! No! It’s not a terminal illness. In all senses of the word, you’re completely healthy,” Technoblade replied. “You may just experience temporary... regressions, from time to time.”

George pressed the palms of his hands into his eyelids. *I need to fucking sleep. I need to sleep and wake up and have my life gone back to normal.* “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Well — the wounds,” Technoblade said, and his voice dropped to an awkward mumble. “They’ll open again.”

George’s foot caught on nothing and he stumbled forward, breath caught in his chest. Technoblade grabbed him and pulled him up before he could collapse. “It doesn’t last for more than a couple minutes,” he continued. “Wounds from a totem revival close almost as quickly as they open.”

“Are you saying I have to go through that again?” George breathed. Memories of agony and the feeling of his ribs grating against a dragon fang filled his head with a thick fog. *No. No. Please, no. Don’t make me relive that.*

“It’s not nearly as bad, I promise. They pass even quicker if you’ve got health potions near.”

“But I still have to feel it, right? I have to feel my stomach—” George made a tearing motion with his hands. “I have to feel it *do* that again.”

Technoblade sighed. “Yeah.”

“Aether Almighty.” A laugh slipped from George’s throat as he tipped his head back, focusing on a spot of glowstone hanging from netherrack roof. He wondered how long it would take to dig through and get to the other end. “This is what I get for being heroic.”

“I’d bet that all of us here are glad to have you alive instead of King Eret,” Technoblade said. “Even with all the side effects.”

“Have you told Tubbo about this?” George asked. “It’ll happen to him too.”

Technoblade shook his head. “I know I have to. I just don’t know how to explain to him or the other boys how to not freak out when his skull inevitably bursts open like a flower while they’re playing chess or something. I don’t need them any more traumatized, but I can’t just isolate Tubbo either. They’ll end up seeing it happen one way or another.”

George felt a shiver down his spine. *Tubbo’s got the wounds on his face. It’ll be a spectacle when those ones decide to explode.* “These next few weeks will be entertaining.”

“You can say that again.” Technoblade outstretched a wing. George moved into his arms, allowed him to practically pin him to his chest and rocket the two of them into the air. “You should rest. I

keep you out here any longer and I think Dream would come out hunting for us himself.”

Dream. George felt the pit in his stomach deepen as they landed beside his waiting carriage. *How the hell am I supposed to explain this to him?*

“Come find me if you start to feel off. I’d like to be there when it happens for the first time.”

Technoblade swung his carriage door open and motioned inside. Dream waited in the same position they’d left him in, battered and bruised and tired to the bone. He barely had the energy to force a smile when he met George’s eye. “You know where to find me.”

The carriage door closed with a *click*. George let himself fall forward, pressing his face into the blue cushions. “What did you guys talk about?” Dream asked in a weary voice.

There’s a better time to tell him. “Totem stuff,” George replied. “Aftereffects.”

To his relief, Dream only tightened his jaw and did not press the conversation any further. *Trust me.* George forced himself to sit up and moved to the other cushion, pressing himself up against Dream’s side. *I didn’t want to know the details either.* “Have you slept?”

“No,” Dream said. “I don’t really want to.”

George grimaced. Weight seemed to be drawing Dream down by every bone. His eyes fluttered with every blink, as if closing them for too long would toss him into the throes of unconsciousness. “You need to,” he said sharply. “You can hardly stay awake as it is.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Well, you’re lying.”

“Please don’t do this to me now.” Dream let his head fall against the carriage wall with a *thunk*. “I don’t want to fight with you again.”

“Then tell me why you won’t sleep!”

Dream groaned. “Because if I—“ he went to scratch at his arm, but his fingers became caught in the blood dried into the sleeves— “Oh, fuck this shirt. I want out of this fucking stupid *shirt* —“

Overcome with sudden aggression, he grabbed the bloody sleeve in one hand and ripped it at the elbow. “All I can smell is blood right now. I’m fucking sick of it.” He threw the unravelling linen to the floor and fisted his hands in his hair. “I think I could puke.”

There was a tightness to his voice that George was achingly familiar with. “Come here,” he murmured, shuffling back to the opposite carriage wall to allow Dream to settle between his legs. Dream laid his head on his collarbone and crossed his arms over his chest, but he didn’t shift or move away as George’s hands came to join his. “Let’s not go tearing our clothes off in here. People will assume things.”

“Oh, gross,” Dream chuckled tearfully. “Let’s spend a night together *not* in mortal danger first. Baby steps.”

“Baby steps,” George echoed. Dream was warm against his chest, a welcome weight against his wounds. “We’ll just relax for a bit.”

Dream drew in a long breath through his nose. “Yeah. We’ll be fine.”

“Of course we will.”

“Of course.”

George ran his thumbs over the backs of Dream’s hands. Though his aggression had melted away, fear still clung to him like an old perfume. When George squeezed him into a hug, burying his face into his shoulder, he was as stiff as a corpse. “I really am sorry,” George whispered. “For putting you through all of this.”

“You’re alive. That’s all that matters.” Dream shifted until he was laying on his side, one arm tucked beneath the small of George’s back. “I’m not crushing you, am I?”

George shook his head. “I mean it though. I’d be mad if you had done something stupid like that.”

“What, like use my face as a meat shield against an assassin?”

George breathed a laugh. It felt wrong, but Dream still smiled. “I guess that makes us even then. Six-ish years in the making.”

“There we go,” Dream said softly. “Nice and even. No more heroic bullshit needed.”

“Nope. I’ve had enough,” George replied. After a moment, he added, “I love you.”

“And I love you.” Dream’s fingers found George’s own and squeezed. “So don’t go dying on me, please. I’d kind of like having you around in my life.”

George tipped Dream’s head up by the chin and pressed a kiss to his hairline. *I can’t believe I ever let myself believe that I didn’t like you.* “Try and rest a bit. You don’t have to sleep if you don’t want to.”

“I just don’t want to dream about it. It’s fresh enough for me to remember just fine, thank you.” Dream stretched his legs out, wincing as his lower back popped. “It’d be nice to wait a while before reliving it again.”

The pit in George’s stomach deepened. *I’ll tell him tomorrow. After we’ve had a real night’s sleep.* “I’ll be here either way when you wake up. No matter what, I’m alive.”

“You’re alive,” Dream sighed. “That’s what’s important to me.”

When they finally stepped into the courtyard of the Antarctic Empire, cloaked in the morning’s fading darkness, Dream had fallen still against George’s chest, lips pursed in thoughtful slumber. It was Phil who came to fetch them, mouth already open to speak, but he went silent when he saw them and drifted away with a tired smile, wings open to herd the rest of their exhausted party into their respective beds. *Thank goodness.* George pushed his nose into Dream’s hair and murmured against his scalp until he roused, bleary-eyed and wobbly. To see him so vulnerable was strikingly new, almost improper, but it filled George’s chest with such warmth that he found enough energy to pull the two of them back to his bedroom, find a knight to guard the door, and send Dream to the bathroom with an armful of clean clothes before collapsing into his bed, half-dressed in his pyjamas. *Fuck it.* George closed his eyes against the cool silk and groaned. *I’ll sleep in this tunic. I don’t care. Just don’t make me move again.*

“Absolutely not,” Came Dream’s voice. “If I had to change, so do you.”

“No,” George muttered. He felt Dream’s hand come to rest against the back of his calf. “I can’t move.”

“Come on, now. It’s just a tunic.” Dream pulled him into a sitting position, facing away, and tapped George’s arms with his fingers. “Raise your arms. I’m not letting you sleep in rags.”

Reluctantly, George raised his arms above his head and felt his dirty, blood-soaked tunic be pulled off his body. He kept them raised, expecting to feel the softness of a new shirt against his fingers, but Dream seemed to have gone still. “Dream?” George said.

“The marks.” Dream’s voice was tight. “They’re on your back too.”

Oh.

George let his arms fall. The bed behind him creaked, bending with the weight of a tired body. “That’s kind of what happens when something goes through you,” he said with an empty chuckle. “You get marks on either end.”

Quietly, almost timidly, Dream leaned into his bare shoulder. His breath was warm against the back of George’s neck. “If you want privacy, I’ll—“

“No, stay. Help me get this on and then get into bed. You’ll fall asleep standing up if I keep you up any longer.” George raised his arms again, ignoring the burn of his muscles. “Don’t dawdle. I’ve got a chill.”

A clean tunic brushed past his face, smelling of winter air. There was no nicer feeling in the world. “Spoiled,” Dream murmured, fixing the neckline with gentle fingers. “You’re just rotten.”

“Shut up.” George crawled forward and slipped beneath the covers, curling his toes in the woollen warmth. “You know you love me.”

“I do. I really do,” Dream said. “But I’ll kick your ass if you don’t get out of my spot on the bed.”

“Your spot?” George pulled the blankets to his chin and forced his eyes shut as Dream walked around the side of the bed. “I don’t see your name on it.”

“I always sleep on the left side of the bed. Go down to the Knight’s Quarters and ask Sapnap.” Dream’s hands pressed down on either side of him, poking humorously into his sides. “I can’t just break that streak now.”

“You can’t move a king from his sleeping place!” George squeaked, but Dream shoved him to the side in a single thrust. “I’ll have you beheaded for that.”

Dream pushed his way between the covers before George could reclaim his stolen territory, smirking in satisfaction. “You can adapt to being a middle-bedder. Be a resourceful king.”

Things were almost normal. Things were almost *nice*. George scowled, pressed his toes into Dream’s calf, and sidled up against his arm because that was all his thumping heart would allow him to do. Dream didn’t press him, didn’t pull him any closer — he simply laid a kiss on his cheek and blew out the half-melted candle standing crooked on their bedside table. In darkness, he barely moved at all. Minutes passed in silence; George traced the shape of his face with his eyes, dragging them over and over the straight slope of his nose. Then Dream shifted to his side, lifted his hand, and swept George into his chest in one fluid motion. “I can sleep if you’re here,” he whispered. “Get some rest.”

The cocoon of his arms was warm and safe and smelled of home. George let his eyes fall shut.

Sleep took him quickly.

Chapter End Notes

editing this while I'm so tired that I'm going cross-eyed if you see a typo or editing mistake no you didn't

a gentler chapter for you friends this week! Dénouement has never been my specialty, so I hope you guys enjoyed a break from the action. We're gearing up to tie off these plot lines! :D

Kidney update: they're fine 😊 blood test and ultrasound normal. I guess I just get random horrible pain sometimes

if you're from Shy Ghost's community tab on yt please know that I read your comments under their fanart of COSSOG and it made my night I love you all

Comments and kudos are greatly, greatly appreciated :)

-Ophelia

Growing Pains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Is that all from him?”

Technoblade set the bowl of bloody rags onto the counter and wiped his fingers on his thighs. “Yeah. Most of it was old blood that had caked onto the cuts on his face and arms. The dragon didn’t get him much at all.”

Phil pursed his lips. Two meals (breakfasts? Dinners? Techno had been up for so long he couldn’t tell) sat on the table behind them, covered by metal trays, but neither Techno nor Phil had even gone near them. Techno wasn’t sure if he’d be able to eat at all that day.

King Eret was dead. Their whole group had returned alive. Nothing could have gone better.

Yet still, Techno remained at ill ease.

“I’m keeping my eye on that Nikki girl. I’ve seen her by King Eret’s side since she was a young teenager — her as Queen is a wildcard I refuse to underestimate,” Phil said. He cast his eyes on the floor. “It wouldn’t be wise to think she’s any better than Eret was at this point. She could be a shadow of them.”

Techno remembered the emptiness that had filled her eyes as she’d knelt over Eret’s body, the look of devastated hatred that had marred her soft features. She couldn’t have been older than Wilbur. *How does someone end up so angry at the world?* His empty stomach twisted, but not with hunger. *What kind of parents did she have?*

A shout rang out from the room over, a garbled half-sentence tinged with fear and sleepy absurdity. Wordlessly, Phil rose from his place on the edge of the bed and slipped out the door. *Maybe she had a family that made an older sibling raise her because they couldn’t handle her energy.* Alone, Techno felt cold. *Maybe King Eret was the one who taught her to read and write. Maybe King Eret filled that void her family had left.*

An ache spread through his body like the chill of a biting day and he sat down on an empty infirmary bed, rubbing loose feathers from the ends of his wings. His father re-entered a moment later, holding Tommy across his chest and shoulder. “Tommy couldn’t fall asleep,” he said softly. “He was having nightmares.”

“Shit. Do you want me to go watch Tubbo and Ranboo?” Techno asked. *I don’t want Tubbo alone with anyone just yet. Not until I can figure out when his head will explode.*

“No, stay. They’re just a wall over.” Phil set Tommy down on the bed and laid a hand on his back. “Are you alright, mate?”

“My face hurts,” Tommy moaned. The hoarseness of his voice made Techno’s teeth clench. “The health potions aren’t working. The cuts aren’t closing.”

He shifted onto his side, bearing his injured face to the light of the half-melted candles. The cuts *had* closed somewhat — Techno was sure that the full, bloody extent of his brother’s wounds would be branded into his brain for the rest of his days — but the healing had dissolved the scabs so the slices against his forehead and nose were bright red and deep enough to sting with the open

air. His arms and hands were bandaged too, and from the stilted movement of his fingers, they hadn't taken too well to the healing either. Techno had been wounded like that before. It wasn't pleasant.

"They will, I promise. You just need to rest," Phil murmured. "Do you want another health potion?"

"No! I'm tired of them!" Tommy screamed. His heel whacked the bed's metal frame with enough force to make the old springs squeal. "I hate them! I hate this!"

Phil's wings outstretched instinctively. "Tommy, please. Don't wake your friends." He flinched as Tommy's foot came down once more against the infirmary bed's railing. "Tommy, *please* —"

The sound rang in Techno's ears. He'd been there before — feet away from the eye of a growing hurricane, willing desperately for the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Had Wilbur not been locked in a stone box beneath their feet, sleeping for eternity, he would have rushed in at that moment. Perhaps in his pyjamas, somehow always free of wrinkles, or in the billowing regalia that had always looked better on him than it ever looked on Techno. He would have come in and swept Tommy up into his arms, pressed him into what must have been a Tommy-shaped groove in his hip, and taken him away, out of sight, where he could cry and scream without being heard. And Tommy would have let him take him, because he loved Wilbur more than he loved Techno and Phil. Techno knew that. He'd *always* known that. On some level, Phil probably had too.

But Wilbur wasn't there. He'd never be there again.

Techno grabbed a pillow.

"Come on, Tommy." Techno caught his heel as he went to kick out again. Tommy shrieked, yanking his foot from his grip, and twisted onto his back to drive his other heel into Techno's leg. "*Dude*. Stop, just— stop!"

"Go away!" Tommy snarled.

If you wake up your friends, I'm killing you, Techno thought. "Tommy, work with me." He let the pillow fall from his fingers and raised his hands in a mock surrender. "I know you're in pain. Let us help you. Do you want a cold rag or something?"

"I want to not be hurting!" Tommy kicked the bedframe once more, but his energy seemed to wane ever so slightly. *Good. Sentences. This is progress.*

"Well, I can't make you not hurt right now. All I can do is try to make you comfortable. Stop kicking the bed, and we'll figure something out. Deal?"

Tommy's eyes caught Techno's for a moment, flickering with defiance. *Come on, kid*. A silent war waged between them in the seconds they stared at one another. *I don't have enough energy to do more of this today.*

Then Tommy turned back onto his stomach, buried his face in his arms, and said, "There's ants in my blood that makes me want to punch things."

"Kick the pillow, then. *Just* the pillow — nowhere else. Got it?" Techno held the pillow up against his stomach. "Come on. Give me what you've got."

The first hit came with surprising force. Techno forced down the instinct to get annoyed. "Ow," he said. "But good job. Give me another one."

Overcome with a sudden vigour, Tommy puffed his bloodstained cheeks and began driving his feet into the pillow with all the power a scrawny, injured child could muster. Techno met Phil's eye and forced a weary smile, even as his stomach burned with the dull ache of brute twelve-year-old force. Tommy pummelled the pillow until the satin ripped, spilling downy feathers onto the bed and floor. "Oh," he said in surprise, as though he hadn't been bludgeoning the poor cushion to death for the last half-minute. "Fuck."

He turned to Phil, wings bristling with guilt and aggression, but their father only patted him on the back and smoothed the knotted hair at the back of his head. "That was good," he said warmly. "I'm proud of you."

Tommy went a little-wide eyed at that. "But I punched shit."

"You didn't freak out, though. Before, this room would have been in pieces by now." Phil gestured around, chuckling softly. "You did well, Tommy. I'm proud."

Tommy looked at him, candlelight flickering against the bags beneath his eyes, then turned to Techno with an expression he couldn't place. "Thanks," was all he said. Loose hairs stirred against his skin, moved by an unfelt breeze. "I want to go back to bed now."

"You can sleep in here," Phil said, but Tommy shook his head. "I don't want you having nightmares again."

"I'll be okay." Tommy kicked his legs off the bed and stood, wobbling slightly. It was then that Techno realized how thin he really was, how the clothes that had been ever-so-painstakingly tailored to fit him comfortably hung off him like rags off a beggar. Had he really shrunk that much over the past few days? Techno assumed that Dream and George had found a way to feed him on their travels, but —

Oh. The realization hit him with the force of a mace. *The clothes aren't his.*

Wilbur was the only one out of them that fiddled with the woven hems of his tunics. He drove pencils through the intricate loops, worried at them with his teeth until the thread disintegrated and came undone. Sometimes, he'd be spitting up bits of blue for hours. He never explained why he did it. No one ever asked.

Oh, gods. Techno watched Tommy fiddle with the frayed blue ends of his sleeves and felt the sudden urge to be sick. *Wilbur, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.*

Tommy moved past him, a bleached, bloodstained spectre of the brother he'd so horrifically failed, and exited the room without another sound. Techno let out a shaky breath. Part of him wanted to follow Tommy. Part of him never wanted to see him again.

Part of him wanted to walk into that bedroom with a sword in hand and beg Tommy to drive it through him.

"Techno?" Phil said. "Are you alright?"

Techno blinked. The room was warm. His sword hung at his side, heavy against his thigh. A deep fatigue had settled over his shoulders, as comforting as a blanket and as painful as a pillory. "Where can I find parchment paper?" He said. He knew the answer — the chancery office had been his home for years — but the question had left his lips nonetheless.

"My office," His father replied with a soft laugh. "You know that."

Techno nodded. “Yeah. Yeah. Just forgot.”

Phil cocked his head. His hair shone gold in the candlelight. “Why?”

“I’m going to teach Tommy how to write.” Techno swallowed. His throat felt thick.

“Ah.” His father’s face lifted for a moment. “I’ll help. I can help him with the reading.”

Techno kept nodding. He felt like a chicken mindlessly bobbing its head, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop. Nervous energy crackled along his spine. “That’d be nice.”

Don’t hate me, Wilbur. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry it took this long.

“Go to bed, Techno,” Said Phil softly. “I’ll watch the boys.”

Techno forced his head to stop and closed his eyes. His feet were numb, but he knew they’d take him to where he wanted to be. “Okay, Dad.”

He found himself in Wilbur’s room before he knew it, curling himself in the cold satin sheets. It smelled like him. Faintly. That was enough.

In the privacy of his own failure, Techno finally let himself cry.

~

“I’m glad you were honest with me.”

Dream turned his head to the side, eyebrow raised. “What?”

“When we were outside on our horses that one day,” said Sapnap. He pulled the cup of tea to his nose, gave it a long sniff, then took a swig. “Fuck. That burned. But yeah — I made you tell me if you had feelings for King George.”

“You can just call him George.” Dream swallowed the wave of bashfulness that came over him. *I had been so scared then. I’m still scared now, but in a different way.* “You saved his life. He won’t kill you for not using a title.”

“And I’m his little boyfriend’s best friend,” Sapnap said gleefully. He opened his mouth, allowed a wandering snowflake to land on his scalded tongue. A razor-thin slice of the sun poked over the horizon, spilling rays of deep orange into the morning’s indigo. “He can’t hate me. You’d choose me over him, right?”

Dream ignored the pointed glare Sapnap gave him and kept his eyes on the treeline. Balconies always had the best view. *Phil’s a saint for letting us come up here so early. I hope that poor bastard’s gotten at least a bit of sleep.* “I wouldn’t choose either of you. I’d make you two be friends.”

“Okay, but if you *had* to, you’d choose me.”

“Sure.” Dream snatched the cup of tea from his hands and sipped at it. It was hot enough to sting, but so glorious against his aching throat that he didn’t mind.

Sapnap rested his arms on the balcony’s stone railing, looking rather self-satisfied. Dream set the cup down between them. “He’s not my boyfriend, by the way.”

“If you say he’s your king, I’ll puke right here,” Sapnap replied.

“No, dude —“ Dream rolled his eyes— “He’s just not my boyfriend. That’s not the right word.”

Boyfriend felt young, felt innocent. The other knights used to be *boyfriends* to some of the giggling kitchen girls. They’d sneak kisses around the corners of courtyards, bribe a servant or one of the few literate knights to write their *girlfriend* a stupid, sappy letter like a good *boyfriend* was supposed to do. Most of the time, it had made them lose focus on their duties, and the heartbreak that always followed after fucked them over as badly as any stomach flu did.

Boyfriend felt too frivolous. *Lover* felt too raunchy.

“He’s your partner,” Sappnap said in a bored drawl, as though sudden moments of wisdom were regular parts of his day. “Just keep it at that, please. This is already too mushy for me.”

Partner. They’d been called partners once — in the back of a rattling cart pulling them through hell. Dream had been almost asleep, too sick to do any more than shiver and whine, but hearing the odd man’s deep voice call them partners had been enough to abruptly rouse him from the oblivion of his rest.

“My—“ *George scoffed*. “*Oh, we’re not — he’s not my— it’s a—*“

“*Chill out,*” *Corpse replied, his voice a humorous rumble*. “*I meant business partners. You two look like hired hands.*”

“*He’s my bodyguard,*” *George blurted*. “*And my friend. It’s a weird situation.*”

Dream smiled to himself. *If I meet you again, Corpse, I’m kissing you. Weird mask and all.*

They made their way through their shared cup of tea in remarkable time, but Dream found himself not wanting to go back inside. Though his fingertips stung and the tips of his ears hardened until they felt like ice, he found the cold sharp and inviting. He’d had enough of the nether’s heat to last him his entire life, so the kiss of a winter breeze against his flesh was a welcome change. He breathed in, felt the frosty air tickle his lungs. “I’m sorry I couldn’t see you until now. I wasn’t ignoring you on purpose.”

“You got me out of my warm little infirmary bed to drink a cup of tea outside in the cold with you. I didn’t *think* you were ignoring me.” Sappnap stretched his arms above his head, groaning as his sore back popped. His broken hand had healed, but the bruises on his skin remained. “I know things will be different now. You’ve got him.”

“But that doesn’t mean I want your friendship any less,” Dream said. “I’m not going to favour him over you.”

“Yes you will, because he’s your boy— partner, or whatever. That’s normal. If I found someone like that, you bet your ass I wouldn’t be sneaking off to come hang out with you.”

Dream pursed his lips. Sappnap put a warm hand on his shoulder. “Stop angsting. I’m happy for you, man. This is kind of something I’ve seen coming for a while.”

“Liar,” Dream snapped, but he leaned into his friend’s touch anyway. “You were just as surprised as I was.”

“Maybe in some ways. But I also know you. When you get intense about things, you never let them go.” Sappnap cocked a thumb back into the castle. “You’ve been intense about him since the day I met you.”

That's one way to put it. Dream's mind drifted to George, out of whose arms he'd painstakingly pulled himself from that morning. He'd woken up back to back with him, both of George's ice-cold feet tucked against the backs of Dream's knees. He hadn't even stirred as Dream rose and dressed himself, and when Dream crept back to their — *their* — bedside and pressed a kiss to his (rather clammy) forehead, his only reaction was a crinkle of his nose and a hitch in his steady breathing.

"Gross, you're fucking *thinking* about him," Sapnap laughed. "I'm out of here. I refuse to watch your sappy little love affair."

Dream spluttered as he turned to leave and caught him by the elbow. "I'm kidding," Sapnap said mockingly. "But I do think we should go inside. I'm fucking frozen out here."

Dream turned back towards the sunrise, towards the golden snakes eating away at the darkness, and sighed. "Fine. But only because I want to be there when George wakes up."

"Why?" Sapnap said, grabbing their empty tea mug and looping it over his thumb. "So you can give him a big old smoochie?"

"Oh, shut it." The balcony door closed with a quiet *click*.

Sapnap laughed into the warmed air.

~

Dream was three steps from his bedroom door when he realized someone was moving inside. *George must be awake*, he thought with a twinge of guilt. *I'll stay with him until he wakes up next time.*

He opened the door, leaking light into the darkened room. George must have drawn the curtains before they fell asleep the night before. "George?" He said softly.

George didn't reply. Dream could see him moving against their woollen covers, curled onto his side. He stepped in, closed the door behind him. "I was just out with Sapnap having some tea. I hope you don't mind."

Without the light of the hall, George's figure was no more than a writhing, blurry shadow. Something stank. "George?" Dream felt his heart quicken. "George, is something wr—" "

A wet sound killed the words in his throat. George coughed, gasped, then coughed again. His breath crackled as though some liquid were bubbling at the back of his throat. Terror leapt up Dream's chest. "George?" He darted to George's bedside. George was still moving, cloaked within darkness. Dream laid his hand on the bed.

The woollen blankets were soaked in something warm.

Dream reared back as if he'd been burned. His hand was sticky, cooling in the air. "What the fuck?" He fumbled blindly for a curtain. In the moments it took for his fingers to close around the familiar velvet, George's wet choking worsened into agonized half-groaning, half-shrieking. He tore the curtain back, flooding the room with orange light.

There was blood. Everywhere. On the blankets, on the mattress, on the pillows. On George's pale, terrified face, on his grasping, searching hands. There were bloody handprints reaching into Dream's side of the bed, reeking of terrified desperation.

Assassin. Murder. Dream's brain careened into overdrive. *Wounds. Totem. Assassin. Death.*

George.

The door burst open once more and Dream had his axe out before he even realized he had it on him. He swung, half-blind with rage and terror, and felt it sink into the doorframe's wood paneling. "Dream!" Someone screamed over the chaos. "Dream, it's me! Stop!"

Dream's body froze. The shadowed figure in front of him melted into familiarity. *Techno*. Dream pointed back at the bed, at the bloody pile on the floor that was George. "Someone's killed him!" He shrieked. "He's been stabbed!"

Technoblade's face looked swollen, red around the eyes. *More Dragon's Breath?* Dream thought wildly. He pushed past Technoblade into the hall, axe raised over his shoulder. A group of servants scattered all around him like mice. *We're under attack again. It's happening again.* Dream's heart was in his throat. His lungs were heaving but could find no air. *They're going to kill us all.*

Someone yanked the axe from his fingers in a single blow. "Yield, Dream!" A voice commanded. "You're safe!"

Dream whirled around. It was Phil who held his axe, wings outstretched and raised until they nearly brushed the ceiling. "Yield," he repeated in a strong voice. "We're not under attack. You're safe."

Dream grabbed him by the front of his long robes and yanked him in until their foreheads were touching. "George is dying!" He spat. Phil's stony expression did not waver. "He's been attacked!"

Phil planted a gentle hand on Dream's sternum and pushed them apart. "It's the totem's aftereffects, Dream. He's not in danger."

Dream felt the rage leave his body in a rush that left his head spinning. Though he'd not felt cold outside, a chill had found its way into his bones and sapped him of all warmth. "What?" He pressed his hands together and fought to keep them from shaking. "What?"

Technoblade emerged from their bedroom, holding George in a bloody sheet. "Infirmary, now," He said.

"He's dead!" Dream practically squeaked. Technoblade brushed past him, shaking his head, and began down the hall at a brisk walk. Not a run, not a desperate sprint — a *walk*.

Then he noticed George's eyes peeking over the edge of the filthy blanket he'd been wrapped in, half-closed and fluttering but alive nonetheless. That was what allowed his feet to begin moving.

"I assume George didn't tell you?" Technoblade said, turning a sharp corner. Dream slid his hand around George's clammy cheek and shook his head. "Oh, you poor bastard. I thought you knew."

"Knew what?" Dream asked. He hated how small his voice sounded. George murmured something that might have been 'sorry'.

"Being revived by a totem has some aftereffects. This is one of them." He cocked his head towards the massive stain on George's pyjamas. "The wounds open up again. Basically make you relive your moment of death."

Aether fucking Almighty. Can't we have a break? Dream screwed his eyes shut. "Oh. Nice."

"It's not actually dangerous, though. Just annoying and painful."

“That would have been nice to know.”

“I wasn’t expecting it to happen so quickly. George was only revived, like, a day ago. Just our luck.” Technoblade looked down at George and breathed a laugh. “Eh, George?”

George’s bloody lips curled into a slight smile. Dream, however, found the humour of the situation to be quite lost on him. *George isn’t dead. He’s safe*, he repeated to himself, but his heart thundered on in his chest as though he were in the middle of battle. His fingers itched to hold his axe, but Phil had not yet given it back to him. Half of him wanted to scoop George out of Techno’s arms and carry him himself; the other half wanted to smack him silly for *not fucking telling him that he’d have to watch him die again*—

He did neither. He followed Technoblade into the infirmary without another word, humiliatingly meek for someone who had an inferno burning away at the inside of their ribs. Chest aching, he collapsed in the seat beside George’s bed and buried his face in his arms. Moments later, a cold, sticky hand touched the back of his palm, as tentative as it was gentle.

“Sorry,” George said hoarsely. “I didn’t know.”

“You fucking—” Dream lifted his arms just enough to pull George under them and collapse back onto his chest— “You’re going to give me a heart attack someday. You’re going to kill me.”

“Potion. Drink,” Technoblade said gruffly. “That’s all we can really do. I’ll send someone to bring you new sheets and blankets.”

He left without another word, only returning to lay Dream’s axe against the bed. *Probably gone to see Tubbo*, Dream thought. *I don’t want to see the day where that kid’s wounds open.*

“Dream?”

Dream looked up. George brought a weak hand up to his bloody lips. “Help me sit up. I need to drink.”

“Idiot.” Dream pulled him into a sitting position, stuffing pillows behind his back to keep him comfortable. *Damn how mad I am at him. I won’t let the bastard wake up with a sore back.* “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about this shit.”

“I only found out last night!” George exclaimed. “You were hardly even conscious!”

“I still would have listened! You could have *mentioned* it.” Dream uncorked the health potion with enough force to send it splashing over his fingers and forced the bottle into George’s hands. “Drink it. Now.”

“Don’t snap at me.” George took a long, sulking drink. “I’m in pain.”

The wound in his stomach was still leaking blood. Dream swallowed. “Aether fucking Almighty.”

“I thought I’d have more time before it happened. I was going to tell you today!” George leaned back against the bedframe, scowling. “You can’t be mad at me for this. There was no way I could have known.”

“I just had to watch you die again, George! *That’s* why I’m angry!” Dream’s voice came out louder than he expected it to. Loud enough to make George flinch. “I thought I’d lost you again!”

I am not about to cry over this. I’m not. I refuse. Dream pinched the bridge of his nose. “Try to

understand where I'm coming from, here. I'd have liked this situation to be avoided."

George looked away. He looked so wan in the dim light, sapped of the golden undertone that Dream had always envied. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't think of it."

You're so important to me that it hurts. Dream rose from his seat, ignoring George's pained whine, and poured steaming water into a shallow basin. "Come on," he said quietly. "Let's get you cleaned up."

He knew George needed a bath. *George* probably knew he needed a bath. Yet still, he allowed Dream to sit beside him on the bed, place the basin in his lap, and lower George's bloody hands into the hot water. Blood flaked off with the barest touch of a rag, darkening the water to a desaturated red in minutes. George watched him the entire time, eyes mournful. He gasped when Dream ran the rag over the raw burns on his wrists, but offered no words of complaint.

"You can speak," Dream finally said, as soft as he could manage. "I'm not mad at you."

George, instead, leaned in and pressed a kiss to the side of Dream's lips. *I'm sorry*, it said, or at least Dream thought it did. *I love you.*

Dream focused on George's hands, forcing his eyes away. There was blood beneath his fingernails. Dream scraped at it. George let him.

"It's going to be weird going home in a few days," he said, brushing the rag over his index finger. "We haven't been back there in months."

George nodded silently.

"Last time we were there, we weren't even friends." A laugh escaped him. "I bitched at you for not being able to ride a horse after you'd been stabbed. Can you imagine me doing that now?" *No, no you can't. That's the point.*

George leaned in again and pressed a kiss to his hairline. "Sorry if I'm sweaty," Dream said. "I've barely bathed enough to get the stink of Dragon's Breath off of me."

George kissed his forehead, then his cheeks, the bridge and sides of his nose. Dream, silently, stoically, allowed it. When the tears began to fall, George kissed those too. The basin water ran red, too thick to see through, so Dream dumped it down the sink and filled it anew. Then he started on George's face, right on the side of his jaw he'd once found himself daydreaming of kissing as a young teenager and promptly made himself sick over. George leaned into his touch, the pain fading from his expression with each passing minute. Down the curve of his jaw he travelled, up behind his ears and into his hairline, then down his soft cheeks to the pointy apex of his chin. The blood wasn't endless. The more he wiped, the more he cleaned, the more gold returned to George's warming skin.

He was alive. That was what mattered.

"It'll be nice to be home," George said once their reverie had long finished, when their hurt and fear had floated into the air and disappeared.

Dream dropped the bloody basin into the sink. "Do you think any of the castlefolk are still there? Do you think the Eretians would have... taken care of them?"

George shook his head. "If there's one thing the Eretians love, it's free labour. It's probably a tighter ship than when we'd left."

Dream scoffed. “You’ll be paying them overtime for months.”

“Fine by me. So long as I’ve got my home back.”

“It’ll be nice to see the other knights again.” Dream never thought he would have thought of the other knights and felt fondness. Life had become rather strange. “They’ll know about our situation right away.”

“Why,” George said, “Because Sapnap will tell them right away?”

“Bingo!” Laughing didn’t feel as wrong as it had before. George’s laugh was the nicest sound he’d ever heard. “He’s a gossip. And an ass.”

“Good,” George said with a grin. “I don’t want to hide our... relationship. People have already been speculating for years — what’s the harm in being comfortable about it?”

Dream gaped. “Speculating? Who?”

“Lots of people,” George replied humorously. “I had many a lord-in-waiting ask very pointed questions as to my relationship ‘with the knights’. They were rather disappointed to hear that I thought you were an irritating, stuck-up brick of a man.”

“Or they thought we were having the raunchiest hate sex known to man.”

George doubled over, wheezing. *I wheeze too*, the lovesick idiot part of Dream’s brain crooned. “Don’t say that so loud! The kids are probably near!”

“Sapnap asked me if we’d fucked in the forest during our trek here. I was *mortified* .” Dream moved back to George’s bed and sat on the end of it, drawing his knees to his chest. “Then he went and told Quackity about our business and—“

“How do you think *I* felt when Quackity came to me asking why you’d rejected me? I could have died there on the spot!” George slapped his hands on his thighs. “It was horrible!”

Dream leaned forward and captured George’s face in both his hands. “If it makes you feel any better, Sapnap’s probably telling him all about us right now.”

“He’ll be delighted,” George said happily.

“Still haven’t forgiven him for wearing my mask, though. Make sure he knows that.”

George stuck out his tongue. “You’re an idiot.”

Dream kissed him. His mouth tasted of blood, but somehow it didn’t bother him. “Get used to sleeping on the right side of the bed back home.”

“I’ll make you go back to guarding my room.”

“You’d miss me too much.”

“I don’t even like you.”

The remnants of his fear and grief continued to rattle about in his chest for the rest of the morning, but seeing Tommy and Techno bent over a single piece of blank parchment paper as though it held the secrets of the universe brought him enough amusement to chase them back into the shadows. He looked outside, saw groups of winged knights carrying saddles and swords and other gear.

They were almost home.

Chapter End Notes

Haha it's kind of funny that Tommy's wings are cream and red so he literally would have looked like a bleached and bloodstained spectre of Wil— *gunshots*

Y'all thought the tender dnf moments were over? I think not. Plot doesn't exist anymore it's just two idiots angsting and giving each other big old smoochies

bedrock bros fans, you may also come and get y'all juice

remember to follow my tumblr! @opheliabloo I post update links and some fun stuff like fanart when I get it :) biggest thanks to anyone who's given me COSSOG fanart I have literally all of it saved and it makes me cry you're all so talented and lovely I love you all

comments and kudos are much appreciated :)

-Ophelia

Okay, Someday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dream and George left with the sunrise, flanked on either side by lines of mounted guards. Though they'd received a letter from Nikki claiming that her men had left Manburg and the SMP kingdom, it would be stupid to take any chances with their safety. Ranboo watched them leave from Tommy's bedroom balcony, waving to Sapnap's fading figure as far as he could. They'd decided to take the long way home — nobody felt ready to re-enter the nether again. Ranboo had had enough of it for his entire life.

So the castle had become quiet again. Quiet as it had been before, before Dream and George had fallen through their portal stinking of blood and sickness and sweat, before the Eretians were anything more than a baseless threat on a piece of paper. It seemed so long ago. Ranboo was barely able to remember how life had even been back then.

Wilbur had been alive. That was the big difference. His absence filled the halls with invisible smoke, opened raw wounds in the walls. As the dust settled and the days since their ordeal came and went, Ranboo found himself meandering the halls, somehow always ending up outside Wilbur's door no matter where it was he'd set out to go to. He'd never been that close with Wilbur at all — if anything, Wilbur had frightened him — but the yearning to have him back and making the castle feel *right* again was so strong it consumed him.

“What are you doing?”

Ranboo tore his eyes from the golden patterns engraved on Wilbur's door. A fox and a salmon, forever locked in an eternal chase. “Huh?”

Tubbo cocked his head. His cheeks were round and rosy — Phil had been taking extra care in making sure he was well-fed. “You've been standing there for, like, five minutes straight.”

“Ah,” Ranboo murmured. “I just got distracted.”

“We shouldn't hang out here. I don't think Tommy's ready to even come down this hall yet.” Tubbo pointed down the far staircase. “Want to play some chess?”

Ranboo shook his head. “I don't have the brain space for it right now. Go find Tommy.”

“Tommy's writing again with Technoblade,” Tubbo said with a pout. “I can never find him anymore. And you never want to do *anything* anymore.”

Because I feel like I should be sitting by a grave right now, Ranboo thought to himself. He averted his eyes from Tubbo's scars and trained them on the window. It was snowing. “I haven't been feeling too well these days.”

“We could play ring-toss, or go fight the straw dummies, or eat leftover pastries.” Tubbo stepped closer, bumped Ranboo's elbow with his own. “Come on, dude! I want to play! This castle is so boring now that—“

“Why the hell are you so *normal* ?”

Silence hit them with the force of a train. Tubbo's smile faded. When he furrowed his brows, the

motion pulled on his golden scars. “What?”

Ranboo’s thoughts seemed to jumble into nonsense before they could reach his tongue. “You’re normal. Why are you normal? You fucking *died* .”

He’d been waiting for the other shoe to drop for days. He’d waited through meals, through long, sleepless nights, through Technoblade explaining to them how Tubbo’s head might decide to randomly split open again and to somehow not freak out when it happened. The other shoe had dropped for George, but Tubbo still seemed to float above it all, chattering and playing and eating as normal. Had it not been for his missing horns and the kaleidoscope of gold crawling down his face, there’d have been no proof that he’d met his death in the middle of a bloody battlefield at all.

Tubbo stepped back and crossed his arms. “Well, I lived!” He said, looking rather miffed. “Isn’t that what matters?”

“Yes, but—“ Ranboo pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes — “Dude, you haven’t even talked about it at all. It’s like everything went back to normal.”

“I thought that’s what we wanted! Everything *is* back to normal. We won.” A sense of hostility crackled in the air like an impending bolt of lightning. “Do you *want* me to be traumatized or something?”

“No, I think you *are* traumatized and you’re just hiding it! So stop!”

Tubbo stomped his foot. “What the hell’s gotten into you? I lived, George lived, we all lived. Literally everything’s fine.”

Frustration barrelled up Ranboo’s spine and left his head spinning. *Fine? How is this fine?* He clenched his fists, bit down on his cheek to keep from yelling. “No, it’s not. You know that.”

“Well it could be, if you’d stop being such a weirdo about it.”

What doesn’t he understand ? I literally can’t not be weird about it! “Why are you being so rude right now?” Ranboo said, fighting to keep his voice from quavering. “You know that was scary for me.”

“Because you need to get over it!” Tubbo snapped. “I’m alive! Stop grieving for me! It’s weird!”

Ranboo pressed his tongue to the top of his mouth to lessen the pressure building behind his eyes. At his silence, Tubbo’s face visibly soured. “Don’t fucking *cry* , man. I’m so fucking tired of—“

“Why are you guys yelling?”

Ranboo looked up. Tommy stood at the end of the hall, pressed up against the window as though there were an invisible boundary keeping him from even approaching Wilbur’s room. There were blotches of ink on his hands, reddened swelling around his eyes.

“Nothing!” Tubbo barked. “Can we just go do something fun, please? I’m so bored I want to fucking die again.”

I can’t do this. Ranboo screwed his eyes shut and felt the ground jolt beneath his feet. He was around the corner when he opened them, near enough to hear Tubbo’s shriek of frustration. His cheeks began to sting; his throat closed. Ranboo teleported again, then again, until he found himself in a dim room covered wall to wall in dusty bookshelves. He collapsed against the wall, scrubbing away at his burning face, and finally allowed the sobs welling in his throat to come

roaring forth.

Gods, he was an ugly crier.

He stayed like that for what felt like hours, blubbering into his hands and then the sleeves of his shirt when the tears became too painful to wipe away. *Fuck my stupid human half*, he thought bitterly. *And fuck my stupid enderman half too. Fuck everything.*

The occasional pair of footsteps wandered by, but Ranboo didn't fear being walked in on. Nobody ever came into the minor chancery rooms except Technoblade, and he'd been locked in Phil's — no, *his* — office the entire day. Ranboo hoped he didn't have to send many letters to the Eretian's kingdom's creepy new queen. The thought of even being near her again made his stomach turn.

Eventually, his tears stopped. Ranboo rested his cheeks on his knees, cradling his tender heart against himself. He didn't want to go back out, to do the walk of shame to find his friends and have to deal with Tubbo being an arse to him for the rest of the day. *Fuck you, man*. A chill blew by, and Ranboo shivered. *You may be able to get over dying, but I can't get over watching you die.*

He wished Dream was still with them. Cool, brave Dream, who brandished axes when he was startled and wasn't afraid to shout at someone if they were being rude to him. Tubbo wouldn't *dare* tell Dream to 'get over it', or get mad at him for crying. Not a chance.

You were supposed to teach me how to be a knight. Ranboo let himself fall sideways, pressing his inflamed cheek into the cool marble floor. *I need to be stronger than this.*

There came the familiar murmur of voices outside, then a timid knock against the aged wooden door. "Ranboo?" Tommy called. "Are you in there?"

Ranboo sat up. "Yeah."

Another voice piped up. "Do you want space or can we come in and talk?"

Tubbo. He didn't sound guilty or embarrassed. If anything, he was almost sharp. *I'll cry if I see them now*. "I want space!" Ranboo cried. Pressure began to mount behind his eyes again, but he screwed them shut before any more tears could fall. *I will not let myself be yelled at.*

The footsteps began once more, then faded down the hall. Selfishly, he hoped Tubbo felt guilty. He hoped Tommy would give him shit for what he'd said.

(Most of all, he just wanted someone to hold him tight and let him cry about having to watch the life be sucked from his best friend's eyes.)

He dozed off there on the floor, dipping in and out of bouts of tears until he felt empty and raw and more tired than he'd been before. The first golden rays of the sunset drifted in through the open window, illuminating rows of book spines in bright shades of blue and red and the occasional green. Green books were always fiction stories, or so Technoblade had once told him, filled with brave knights fighting ravagers and withers and saving entire villages all by themselves. Ranboo focused his eyes on one particularly bright spine, flanked on either side by two massive dictionaries, and felt yearning tug on his heart like the fingers of a lyre player. *I want to be strong.*

He rose to his feet, rolling his sleepy ankles. *I'm going to be strong.*

He found his friends in Tommy's room, Tubbo curled up on Tommy's bed with his knees pulled to his chest while Tommy furiously scribbled at a piece of paper over at his desk. Neither of them noticed him in the doorway for several long moments, and it wasn't until he cleared his throat that

their heads whipped around in such unison that it could have almost made him laugh. “Ranboo!” Tommy exclaimed, half in joy and half in trepidation. Several sloppy iterations of his name were scrawled into the piece of paper clutched between his hands, many of them crossed out by angry lines. Tubbo only stared, mouth pulled into a small frown.

Ranboo breathed in, forced his jaw to steady itself. “I’m here to talk, if you guys want.”

It was Tommy who nodded, though all three of them knew that the situation barely involved him. Ranboo stepped into the room, then gently kicked the door closed behind him. Tommy gave him an awkward smile. “I want to talk.”

“Me too.” Ranboo turned to Tubbo, who averted his eyes. “Tubbo?”

Silence. Ranboo breathed in, exhaled slowly. “If you don’t want to talk, I can leave ag—”

“Yes. I want to talk,” Tubbo said gruffly. “Don’t leave.”

Not being yelled at. This is a good sign. The bed whined as Ranboo sat down, mere inches from Tubbo’s curled-up body. Tubbo still didn’t look at him. Ranboo couldn’t quite place the expression on his face, but he sure didn’t look happy. Tommy was forcing a smile big enough for the two of them.

They never fought. Certainly not in front of Tommy. The novelty of the situation wasn’t exactly amusing.

“You were mean to me today,” Ranboo began. “You were a complete ass.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Tubbo muttered. “I just got freaked out.”

Ranboo crossed his arms. “Well, that doesn’t mean you can just yell at me. It really hurt my feelings.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” Tubbo clapped his face against his hands. “You were just— it’s like — it’s weird!”

“It’s not weird! I watched you die!” Ranboo cried. “You can’t be mad at me for being messed up by that!”

Tommy went wide-eyed. “What’s weird?”

Tubbo kicked himself off the bed and stomped to the window. “He’s treating me like I’m dead!” He said, pulling himself up into the windowsill. “You’re all treating me like I’m dead!”

“I’m not!” Ranboo set his jaw. “I just can’t pretend like everything is normal like you want me to!”

“Shut up. All of you, shut up.” Tubbo’s head thunked against the glass. “I hate this. I thought things were supposed to be getting better.”

Tommy leaned back in his desk chair, drawing the ends of his wings into his hands so he could fiddle with some of his unpreened feathers. For a moment, he looked like his dad. “We did kind of see you die, Tubbo. Ranboo’s right about that.”

“I *lived* though! I’m alive!” Tubbo said in frustration. “And yet I still have to watch you guys be all sad and shit all the time!”

“I still had to watch you die! What don’t you understand about that?” Ranboo replied.

“This is going in circles.” Tubbo stood once more, hands bunched in the material of his knitted tunic, and made his way to the door. “I want space now. Don’t come looking for me, for real this time.”

And with a huff, he was gone. Tommy shrank into his seat, breathing a low whine. “I don’t like it when we’re fighting. I should follow him.”

He went to stand, but Ranboo stopped him. “No,” he said, “He said he wanted space. Leave him be.”

“But Tubbo never actually—“

“He’ll come to us when he’s ready.” *Well, that was a total failure.* “Let’s take a walk outside.”

Tommy scrunched his nose. “But it’s cold out.”

“You live in the Antarctic Empire, Tommy. Find a coat and some gloves and stop complaining.”

~

Thankfully for Ranboo, the gentle snowfall he’d seen before had stopped. Dressed in a cloak nearly longer than he was and a pair of knee-high waterproof boots, he was protected enough from the snow to not be pained when he stepped out into the moist, cold air. It was fresh against his face, fresh against his lungs, and seemed to drive out the constant fatigue that had plagued the castle over the last several days.

Tommy looked like an angry bread roll in all his winter clothes and made sure to whack Ranboo in the face with his wings as he roused them, but Ranboo knew he enjoyed the frigidity as well.

They talked about anything and everything. Ranboo talked about Dream, about knighthood, how he wanted to follow Tubbo back to Manburg and begin his training there. Tommy talked about Wilbur, about his father and brother, about the growing pains that had begun shooting up his thighs and back.

“I like olives now, too. Did you see me eat them at dinner last night?” He said, wiping a dribble of snot from under his nose. “I’ve never liked olives. Only Wilbur ever did. Now I can’t get enough of them.”

It was nice to see light blazing behind his eyes again. “Maybe he’s possessing you,” Ranboo joked.

A large grin split Tommy’s face. “Can you imagine that? Mum won’t give him any olives for dinner so he just pops on down here and takes control of my body just to get them. Oh, that’s something he’d totally do.”

Then he laughed, laughed until the tears came and Ranboo held him there in the snow until they had stopped. “I laughed,” he said weakly, clutching Ranboo’s forearm like a lifeline. “That’s the first time I’ve laughed about him. That’s good, right? That means I’m healing?”

Ranboo leaned his cheek into Tommy’s hair. He smelled nice. “I think so.”

The sunset passed quickly; before they knew it, a mosaic of purples and blues had overtaken the orange sky, chasing the light to the far corners of the horizon. They made their way up the first level of the staircase and stopped, sitting down against the stone wall of the higher platform. “It was so nice when I was with Foolish. You should have seen that place, man. It rocked,” Tommy said. “It was so warm and colourful and Foolish was the nicest guy I’ve ever met. He had an

enderman friend, too.”

Ranboo’s ears perked. He hadn’t seen a real enderman in years. “He did? Were they like me?”

“No,” Tommy laughed. “It was a full enderman. Her name was Cleopatra. I cut myself making fruit for her.” He brought up his hand, pointing to a minuscule scar in the divot between his thumb and index finger. “She was nice too. Maybe if Dad hadn’t fucking *stabbed* Foolish like an idiot, maybe I’d know where he is and I could introduce you two.”

“Your dad stabbed a totem god?” Ranboo grimaced. “Jeez. That’s hardcore.”

“It’s not hardcore!” Tommy bashed his fists onto his thighs. “Foolish will probably never want to be my friend again. I’m still stuck with you and Tubbo as my only ones! No offence.”

“None taken. I’d want a totem god for a friend.” Ranboo focused his eyes on a far point in the horizon. He wondered if Dream and George and their crew had settled down for the night yet, or if they’d ride all through the night like the brave people they were. “Do you know that Dream and George *like* like each other?”

Tommy froze. “Like *marriage* like each other?”

“Yeah,” Ranboo said. “Sapnap told me. *And* I’m like ninety percent sure that Dream sleeps in George’s room with him. I saw them both come out of there one morning and Dream wasn’t even in his armour. He’s always in his armour.”

“Oh, that’s disgusting.” Tommy curled his lips and huffed. “They better not get married. My dad and my mum got married and then she *died*, so marriage obviously had something to do with it. I don’t trust it at all.”

“Well, George has already died, so maybe it’ll work?” It became suddenly clear to Ranboo that he had no idea what marriage actually was. Tommy didn’t either, so it didn’t bother Ranboo all that much. “Maybe one of us can marry Tubbo, because he’s died too, so we’re safe.”

“Ranboo, you’re a genius.”

“I know I am. That’s why I’m going to be the greatest knight ever.”

“Does that mean I have to be the greatest king ever to match?”

Ranboo jolted. Tubbo stood above them, peeking downwards over the higher platform’s stone railing. His eyes were red, flushed with the cold air. “Can I come down?” He asked, almost timidly.

“Yeah!” Tommy exclaimed with a grin. “We were just talking about marriage.”

“Gross.” Tubbo hurried down the steps and lodged himself between them, pulling his knees to his chest. “How long have you guys been out here?”

“A long time,” Ranboo answered. He fought the urge to lean his head on Tubbo’s shoulder and warm his chilly ears. *Not until I get an apology, dickhead.*

Tubbo wrapped his cape tightly around himself, shivering, then forced one of Tommy’s wings open so he could lean into it. “It’s freezing out. Don’t you guys want to go inside?”

“Nah,” Tommy said, and Ranboo shook his head. “It’s nice out. I like the cold.”

“You’ve never liked the cold before.”

“I’m a changed man now. I like olives.”

“I saw that at dinner. You didn’t leave any for me. I was quite hurt over it.”

“Sorry, Tubster.” Tommy leaned back, stretching his arms out in front of him. “Can’t get between a man and his olives.”

Silence fell over them. Tubbo moved in Ranboo’s periphery, sneaking glances, but Ranboo kept his eyes ahead. When Tubbo unglued himself from the warmth of Tommy’s wing and pressed his cheek into the side of Ranboo’s arm, Ranboo only pursed his lips. *I want words this time. Nice words.*

Sometimes, Tubbo could read minds. “I’m sorry.”

Ranboo breathed a silent sigh of relief and let his head fall sideways. “It’s okay. I know you were just freaked out.”

“I don’t like being mean,” Tubbo said softly. “I just hate being reminded that I died. It was scary.”

“It was scary for us, too. That’s why we can’t just ignore it.” Ranboo shifted his cheek, feeling the shaved nub of Tubbo’s horn through his hair. “That hurts more than just letting it hurt.”

“I don’t want to hurt anymore at *all*. I’ve had enough of it. I lost my dad, I nearly lost you guys —” Tubbo paused to scrub at his eyes — “I hate it. It all feels so unfair.”

“We survived the Eretians, though. That’s got to count for something,” Tommy added. A particularly icy gust of wind blew by them, cooling the momentary heat of pain crawling up Ranboo’s throat. “I know Wilbur didn’t make it, but it is kind of crazy that you *and* George lived. That’s got to be some crazy luck.”

Tubbo smiled. In the dimness of dusk, his golden scars still glowed. Perhaps, one day, Ranboo could actually find them cool-looking. “Thanks, Wilbur.”

Tommy’s eyes closed. “Thanks, Wilbur,” he repeated at a tight whisper.

Ranboo raised his hand. Tommy and Tubbo followed, and they bumped their fists together as if sharing an invisible toast. “Thanks, Wilbur.”

Their hands fell to their laps. “You guys can grieve for me, if you need,” Tubbo said. He blinked; a tear dribbled down his cheek. “But please play with me sometimes. Pretend everything’s back to normal. I need us to be happy.”

Tommy twisted inward, sniffing. “I can do that. I want to be happy again.”

“I can be happy sometimes,” Ranboo said. “But you have to let me be sad, too. I don’t think all of my brain knows you’re alive yet.”

“Deal. As long as I get my sometimes-happy. Then I’ll be okay.”

“I love you guys,” Tommy blurted tearfully. “You guys are my best friends. You’re not allowed to die.”

“No dying.” Tubbo raised his hand, pinky outstretched. “We can’t die until we’re old. That way it won’t hurt as much when one of us dies, because we’ll be old and expecting it so we won’t care.”

“How old?” Tommy linked his pinky with Tubbo’s.

“Like, forty. That’s pretty old.”

Tommy frowned. “That’s how old my dad is.”

“Oh. Well, fifty then.”

“That’s better.” Tommy nodded sagely. “Fifty it is.”

Ranboo curled his pinky around his friends’ interlocked fingers. He had much bigger hands than them. Tommy seemed to think that made him harder to beat at Rock, Paper, Scissors. Honestly, it probably did.

“Deal.”

~

“You were out late.”

Tommy pulled his knees to his chest and rested his chin on them. “Ranboo and Tubbo had a fight. It’s okay now, though. We went outside to relax.”

“That’s good,” Phil murmured. “You’ve got frost damage on your wings, though. That’ll make your feathers fall out quicker.”

He ran a hand down the back of one of Tommy’s wings, smoothing the last of the misplaced feathers. “You’ve got such lovely red on the ends here. It’d be a shame to ruin them.”

Tommy shrugged. “They’ll grow back.”

“That’s what Techno said. Now he swears he’s got primaries that never grow in as black as they used to.”

The hearth in his father’s room was ablaze, flooding Tommy’s senses with yellow light and heat. If he stuck out his foot just enough, he could touch the lashing flames with his toes. He wouldn’t, because that would hurt like hell, but it was fun to think about anyway. Tommy loved the heat. He loved the sun.

Rather ironic for the prince of the Royal Antarctic Empire.

Phil rose to his feet, cracking his wrists. “Gods, I haven’t preened one of you boys in years. Thought I’d lost my touch,” he said. “You look better than you have in years. I’ve been wanting to get at these raggedy things for a while now.”

Tommy reached behind him, feeling his softened wings. His head felt fuzzy. *I need to sleep.*

“Thanks, Dad,” he murmured. He wasn’t sure how he’d make the walk to find his friends again. Everything but the dancing flames in front of him was still, as though they’d fallen asleep too. The world smelled of firewood and was as soft as down feathers beneath his fingers.

“I’ll always say yes to helping you out with your wings, Tommy,” his father replied with a gentle smile. “About time I start teaching you how to keep them looking their best.”

“Mmhmm.”

“There are creams you can buy to protect the feathers. I’ve always thought it to be snake oil shit,

but we can find you a tub of one to try out if you like the way it smells.”

“I love you, Dad.”

The words fell off his sleepy tongue before he could stop them. Tommy closed his eyes, biting on his cheek to tamp down the jolt of embarrassment that shot through his veins, and had just placed his hands on the floor to help him stand when a pair of arms came around him with so much force that it nearly took him off the ground. “Ow,” he muttered, but twisted around to bury his face in his father’s shoulder anyway. “Dickhead.”

“A father can never hear that he’s loved enough times.” Phil’s hands were warm against his skin. “Those are our favourite words in the world.”

Tommy leaned into him, swallowing a rush of emotion that crawled up his face. “I love you,” he repeated. “You’re a good dad. I know I’m a shit kid.”

“You’re not. Even if you were, that still doesn’t make what I did right,” Phil said. “I did you wrong. I did Wilbur wrong. And for that, I’ll always be sorry.”

His hand closed around the back of Tommy’s head, holding him close. “I chose to be your father — there is nothing you could have done to justify me failing that responsibility.”

Oh, Dad. Oh, Wilbur. Oh, everything and nothing at all. Tommy felt tears leak through his eyelashes. “Dad, I—“

“You’re so kind, Tommy. You’re kind and you’re sharp and you’re far braver than I ever was at your age. You’re braver than I am now.” Phil’s breathing stuttered. “There’s so much good in you that I’ve taken for granted.”

“I’m still bad. I made Wilbur hate me.” Grief gripped Tommy’s lungs in an iron hold and made him choke. “He died thinking I was bad.”

His father fell silent, sucking in shaking breaths through his teeth. “My last—“ a sob broke free— “My last conversation with him was about you. He was angry with me. We both said things I think we’d regret now, if we were able to.”

His wings came in, shielding him from the pain of a memory Tommy would have given anything to be there for. Just to see Wilbur one last time. “But,” Phil continued, “He made it so clear how much he loved you. How much he wanted to protect you. How much he wanted you to be loved in the way you needed to be loved.”

“I miss him so much,” Tommy whispered.

“I do too. I’ll miss him every day for the rest of my life.” Phil pulled back, cupping Tommy’s face with shaking hands. There were tear tracks down his face, flickering in the hearth’s golden glow. “But I won’t let either of you down again. No matter what you do, or what you think you’ve done in the past. I’ll always be there.”

Don’t ugly cry, Tommy told himself. You’ll ruin the moment.

Phil pressed a long kiss to Tommy’s forehead. “I’m so lucky to have you as my son,” he said. “You’d have been your mother’s pride and joy.”

The ugly tears came. And like Wilbur once had, Phil held him through it all. Tommy ended up curled in his father’s lap, clutching the front of his tunic, staining the satin with his tears and his

snot and the stale acridness of pent-up sorrow. The hearth turned to embers, and the room went dim; Tommy wondered if this is what the afterlife felt like. He hoped it did.

Wordlessly, Phil stood, lifting Tommy in his arms as he went. “Tommy?” He whispered. “Are you awake?”

Tommy kept his eyes shut. *Yeah, but you don’t need to know that.*

He heard the sound of a breathy chuckle. “There we go,” Phil murmured. “I’ll do him right, Kristin. I promise I will.”

Hi Mum, he thought, as though she were hovering near. Tell Wilbur I love him. Take care of him for me.

A chill settled over him, as cold as a gust of winter air. *It felt nice. I hope that’s you, mum. Or Wilbur. Either’s fine, I won’t complain.*

Phil laid him down against fire-warmed sheets and tugged a blanket over his wings. The chill did not go away, even as warmth seeped into Tommy’s bones. If he tried hard enough, he could pretend they were two frosty hands, light and pleasant upon his shoulders.

The cushioned chair beside his father’s bed creaked, and a hand found its way into Tommy’s hair. “I love you,” Phil whispered to no one in particular.

With the last shreds of his consciousness, Tommy thought, *I love you too.*

Chapter End Notes

fun fact I wrote this listening to Fourth Of July by Sufjan Stevens and cried while writing for the first time

also yes it’s canon Tommy has no idea what marriage is and it’s canon that nobody is going to tell him

TWO MORE CHAPTERS LEFT MY DUDES. ONE CHAPPY AND THEN AN EPILOGUE??? THEN WE’RE DONE??? bro I’m losing my mind thank you all so much for the support. Some of y’all have been around for MONTHS leaving comments and stuff and I love you for it

enjoy Dream’s new song tonight!

Comments and Kudos are very much appreciated :)

—Ophelia

Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Their castle had been sacked.

George couldn't be happier to be home.

"I'll have to get all these photos redone," He said, running his fingers over what remained of the mounted frames. The paintings themselves were long gone; ashes in a firepit somewhere, George guessed. A sorry fate for such beautiful art. "I hope the girl that originally painted them is still around. She was super young— I think she'd be eighteen, now. What a kid."

The Eretians had torn down every single painting, sliced up the curtains and most of the pretty wood paneling George had been so fond of, torn out sections of the floor with the spiked heels of their boots. The castle had come back to them a looted skeleton, so familiar and yet as new and frightening as the totem god's pyramid had been. The walls were barren and colourless, the hall floors covered in scratches and the gashes of dragged blades. The infirmary was the only room left somewhat standing, and even that had been sacked of most of its valuable resources.

But it was their home nonetheless, and George had his friends with him to breathe life back into its corpse. That was what mattered.

"It's a shame." Dream stepped over a tattered curtain and moved to George's side. "I loved these paintings. They were much better than the ones your father liked."

"Those ones made me look like a murderer!"

"I know!"

George leaned back into his chest. "What have the others found of the castlefolk?"

"Most of them didn't have the chance to escape, so they've just been making meals for the Eretian soldiers posted here. There were casualties among the knights, though." Dream stiffened. "They fought back."

George closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Tell that to Sapnap. They were his friends more than they were mine."

He moved from his spot against George's back and walked to one of the massive windows, looking down at the unkempt courtyard below. Some of the winged knights fluttered by, holding debris in their arms. "Gods, the Eretians made a mess of this place."

George shrugged. *Buildings and paintings and curtains I can replace. People, I can't.* "I'm the richest person in the country. Most of this stuff will be back to its proper stuff by the end of the month," he said. "And I can live just fine without my fancy carpets until then. The real issue is finding replacements for the knights and the castlefolk that fled."

Dream's face changed. George saw his fingertips tighten on the windowsill. "Yeah," he murmured. "Is your bedroom still standing?"

“Probably,” George said. “Do you need to lay down?”

“You do,” Dream replied, in that voice George hadn’t heard in so long. *The knight voice. The I’m-protecting-you-no-matter-what voice.* “You don’t sleep well in a carriage. You need a real bed.”

“I’m not going to bed while everyone else busts their ass getting this place back in shape,” George said sharply. “And I can tell you’re hiding something.”

Dream scowled. “I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I’m not!”

I didn’t realize how bad of a liar he was without the mask. George pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re not winning this battle, Dream. Tell me what’s on your mind before I go find a chore for you to do.”

Dream turned with a huff and leaned the small of his back against the windowsill. “Where are you going to get the new knights?”

“Uh—” George blinked— “Recruits, I guess.”

“Where do the new recruits come from?”

“I’m really not sure; you knights handle the recruitment process. What’s this all about?”

“Kids like me, George. Wild kids. Abandoned kids.” Dream put a hand to his chest. “I don’t—I don’t want things going back to the way they were.”

Oh. An echo of the wild girl Dream had called a friend flickered in George’s mind. “We’re not cruel to them. You of all people should know they’re provided for.”

Dream nodded, but he still looked upset. “Yeah, but— like, it’s still— it’s hard, George. Once you’re a knight, you never stop being a knight. You’re trapped for life.”

George raised an eyebrow. “A knight can leave their contract whenever—”

“A knight who can’t read, or write, and has only known the woods or knighthood since their childhood? There’s nowhere for us to go. Nobody wants us. People can smell the woods on you from a mile away.” Dream jabbed a finger at his own chest. “I spent my life beside the king himself and people *still* sniffed the woods out on me. And that made me lesser.”

Dream paused, unspoken words dancing upon his tongue. Guilt’s icy claws needled at George’s spine. “I didn’t know,” George said. “I’m sorry.”

Softness broke through the hardened mask of Dream’s face and he stepped forward, drawing George into his arms. “I wasn’t getting mad at you. I know you’re kind,” he said, resting his head against George’s temple. “Your dad was kind too, in his own way. That still doesn’t mean I can’t want more for people like me.”

A streak of sunlight broke through the clouds overhead, illuminating the haze of dust and particles in the air. Dream’s grip tightened. “I don’t ever want someone to look at me or any other knight the way Hannah did when she died. I’m not a slave. I’m proud of what I do.”

They stood in silence for a moment, watching the shadows of the Antarctic Empire soldiers whizz

by. Dream's heartbeat was slow and rhythmic against George's chest. "So what do you want to do?" George asked. "Stop recruiting from street kids?"

"No, not exactly. I just want them to have more options. Teach them to read and write and stuff, y'know. So that they can move on to other things if they so want."

"Like a school? Teach them literacy and fighting at the same time?"

Dream perked up at his words. "Yeah," he replied, his words suddenly light. "Something like that. Somewhere where they can be safe, and warm, and fed. Somewhere where they know they matter."

If your heart were any more golden, we'd have piglins clamouring to steal it. George tilted his head up and gave Dream a smile, which he then returned. "I'll make it happen," he said. "Somehow. You and Sapnap will help out."

"I want to," Dream said. "I want to work with the kids. If I learn to read, I can help them learn too."

There was such excitement in his voice that it made George's heart swell. "That'll work just fine."

Dream leaned in and pressed a grinning kiss to George's lips. "Thank you. You're the best. I love you so much."

"It's fine—" George shrieked as Dream whisked him off his feet, spinning them both in a wild circle. George's foot caught on a piece of curtain and sent it flying, blowing a cloud of dust into the air. "Put me down!" He laughed. "This is unprofessional! I'll fire you!"

Dream dropped him, and in the moment he stumbled, grabbed him by the hand once more and pulled him into another kiss. "I'm sorry," he replied, grinning so widely the scar tissue on his lips began to stretch. "I'm just happy. I'm so happy, George."

I love the way you say my name. "I like you happy. Keep being happy." George cupped Dream's face in both his hands. His thumbs traced the scars he'd once so desperately wanted to kiss, smooth against Dream's sun-warmed skin. He had a constellation of freckles over his cheeks and nose. *That was the first thing I noticed about your face,* George thought with a gentle hum. *Even then, I loved you. I just didn't know it yet.*

Sapnap rounded the corner in a breathless sprint, a stumbling Quackity attached to his shoulders. "Dude," he gasped. "Stop eye-fucking each other for a second. There's so much booze left in the kitchens. The Eretians didn't touch any of it! Are they sober or something?"

A blush sprung up Dream's cheeks as he pushed himself away from George. "What?" He spluttered.

"Beer, dude!" Quackity said excitedly. His tunic was wrinkled, his hat askew on his dark hair. "There's so much of it left!"

"It's definitely poisoned," Dream replied, but he couldn't hide the joy leaking into his words. "Don't touch it until someone tests it or something."

"We've already tested it. Six pints exactly." Sapnap motioned up and down his body. "No casualties yet."

"None," Quackity echoed with a giggle.

George raised his hands triumphantly. “The kingdom is saved!” He exclaimed. “Sapnap’s got his shitty unpoisoned beer!”

“It’s not shitty!” Sapnap said, pointing an accusatory finger. “You’re just a spoiled king!”

“No, it’s shit,” Dream replied immediately. “You just have shit taste.”

The sound of their laughter echoing off the empty walls made them more like home than any painting ever could.

~

Coronations were fucking *boring*.

Tommy ducked beneath the arm of a laughing noblewoman, narrowly avoiding the hem of her decorated sleeve. The party had been going on for what felt like hours, and Tommy had yet to find a single guest that he actually gave a shit about. Tubbo and Ranboo had disappeared into the crowd minutes before, mostly unnoticed with their lack of royal regalia. Tommy himself, however, had been so nastily *forced* into his heavy, itchy ceremonial robes and couldn’t take a single step without somebody turning and bowing to him. *Not the king!* He wanted to scream. *I’m just awesome and handsome enough to look like one!*

Techno sat at his decorated throne at the front of the room, surrounded by the mounds of flowers and fruit bundles and clay pots he’d been given as coronation gifts. His wings had been groomed to irritating perfection, his hair loose down his back in a shining pink curtain. Tommy wondered if he was hot in the massive fur-lined cloak he wore, or if the jewel-incrusted crown atop his head made his neck ache with each polite nod he gave to the long line of guests that had formed down the centre of the hall.

(Not that Techno would ever tell him the truth if he asked, but it was funny to think about anyway.)

The orange rays of the sunset streamed in through the massive windows, casting great beams of lights on the polished floors. People danced, people talked — a small orchestra played away in one corner on shiny instruments Tommy couldn’t begin to name. Servants walked about with trays of food on their hand. It was *happy*. People were *happy*.

I wish you were here. The memory of Wilbur hit him in a painful jab. *You’d be so happy too.*

He reached up and fingered the blue wire flowers that had been woven into his crown that morning. Phil had done it himself. “*So you know he’s there with you today,*” he’d said, lowering his hands so Tommy could watch them bend coloured bronze into petals with deft ease. “*Keeping you grounded, keeping you calm. Reminding you that we’re proud of you.*”

The familiar ache of tears pressed against the backs of Tommy’s eyes, but he swallowed it. *You’re going to be proud of me, Wilbur. I’m going to be so awesome and amazing that it’s going to make you die all over again. Double-death. Take that.*

Someone stepped on the his robe’s long train and he stumbled, jolting backwards. Scowling, Tommy tried to yank it away, but whoever stood on his clothes remained steady. He turned, ready to bark at whatever stupid nobleman was getting dirt on his nice outfit, but his insults died on his tongue as he recognized the familiar figure grinning down at him.

“*Dream!*”

Dream caught him with ease as he launched himself into his arms, chuckling as Tommy thumped

his heels into the back plates of his armour. “Hey, kid!” He said. He smelt nice, and his hair was cut and brushed. George must have forced him into a bath or something. “Technoblade better not be as happy to see me. I can’t pick him up as easily.”

“You came!” Tommy smashed his hands onto either side of Dream’s face and smushed his cheeks. “I didn’t think you guys were going to come!”

The last couple months hadn’t been easy for Dream and George, given how their castle and country had been so badly fucked with. Techno never gave details as to what or how they were doing when Tommy so often asked, but he’d mentioned something about a school or something. It sounded boring. Phil had told Tommy quite early on not to get his hopes up concerning their attendance.

But there they were. Like a gift from Wilbur himself.

George melted out of the crowd, holding a royal blue cloak between his hands. “I had to take this thing off,” he chuckled. “Someone nearly dragged me to the floor back there. It’s ruthless.”

“Want me to carry it?” Dream hefted Tommy to one hip and stuck out his arm. “Go socialize. You’re the king here.”

George rolled his eyes. “I’m fine. Let me see Tommy.”

Dream turned so Tommy could lean down from his arms and let George give him a quick hug. “How are you guys?” Tommy said. “Dad said you weren’t coming!”

“We’re good! Things are moving slowly, as expected. Dream’s trying to start a little academy for some of the street kids.” George turned to wave at a passing noblewoman. “They’re still hesitant to join, but we’ve got a couple little ones interested. If not just for the promise of hot meals. Our old half-demon friend is going to help out as well.”

“Can you read yet?” Tommy demanded.

“I’m getting better!” Dream exclaimed. “I practice every night. Are you keeping up with your practicing too?”

“Yeah!” Tommy thwacked Dream’s armoured chest with his fist. “I bet I can read *and* write better than you can.”

“Hard pass, chicken wings,” Dream scoffed. “You’ve still got a little baby brain.”

“Do not.”

“Do to!”

“You two are incredibly and equally irritating.” George flicked Dream’s cheek. “I’m going to see Technoblade. Try not to cause a fire when I’m gone.”

“No promises!” Dream called after him. He was smiling widely. Really widely. Tommy didn’t find George *nearly* interesting enough to warrant a smile like that.

“You two act really weird together,” he hissed, leaning in close to Dream’s ear. “Are you two married or something?”

“Shut it.” Dream’s smile didn’t waver. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“I already know your secrets. You can marry George because he’s already died once. It’s safe.”

“What? I— nevermind.” Dream gave him a pat on the back. “Let’s go find your friends.”

Dream carried him about for the next little while, much to the delight of Tubbo and Ranboo when they finally materialized again. *I like being carried.* When it became too bothersome to keep on, Dream looped Tommy’s crown over his arm and let him lean his head on his shoulder. *I like it a lot.*

“If you want, Ranboo, you can come to the school too.” Dream popped a sour-berry tart into his mouth. “I know you already know how to read, but you’d learn fighting skills too. I think you’d have fun.”

Ranboo’s tail straightened into a stiff line. “I can?” He asked, leaning forward on the balcony railing. “You’d let me?”

“Of course!” Dream said. “You said you wanted to be a knight. No better way to start.”

Ranboo disappeared in a burst of purple sparks, then reappeared a moment later, vibrating like a bumblebee. “Dude!” He grasped Tubbo’s shoulders until his arms shook. “That’s so cool! That’s going to be awesome!”

“I’d come too,” Tubbo said, “But I want to stay with Techno and learn to do king stuff. I probably should start learning early.”

“I’ll write to you all the time,” Ranboo said happily.

“Deal.”

They shared a handshake. Tommy reached over and whacked their hands with his. “I’ll write too! I can write now!”

He could only write somewhat, but they didn’t need to know that. He’d get his dad to help out if he needed it.

Eventually, he found himself beside his brother, crouched in the mounds of coronation gifts while Techno talked with George and their father. Some of the guests had finally begun to leak out of the throne room, trickling into the streets to find louder places to continue their drunken partying. Dream had left with Tubbo and Ranboo in search of more food, so Tommy curled up beneath his brother’s throne and picked at a painted orange he’d found in a woven cornucopia. His eyelids were heavy.

“You sleeping down there?” Techno’s heel bumped against the back of Tommy’s head. “I can practically feel you snoring.”

“No, I’m eating,” Tommy replied. “Someone gave you an entire cone-thing of oranges. They’re super fucking good.”

“Don’t eat all of them. They’re mine.”

“You’ve got loads of shit to eat. You should be thanking me.”

Techno’s foot bumped against him again, but it was gentle. Tommy swatted at it playfully. The world around him smelled like oranges and wing oil and spices, fuzzy around the edges as exhaustion tickled at his bones. His robes felt very warm and comfy, now. Tommy leaned his head against his sleeve, dragging his nose against the cotton. *I want to stay here forever.*

“Time to round up the kids?” Came his father’s voice. “Tommy’ll be asleep under there in the next ten minutes. I can take him up to bed if you’d like.”

“No,” Tommy groaned, tossing an orange against his father’s calves. “I want to stay out with the party.”

“You’re curled up under there like a rodent half-asleep!” Phil replied. “Not much partying going on here at all. Just boring adult stuff.”

“Find Dream. He’ll carry me. He’s cool and strong.”

“He’s not your personal ride,” said George humorously. “I should start making you rent him if you’d like to be carried around so much.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re probably *married* or something.”

There was a long moment of silence, and Tommy hid his snigger in his sleeve. *Boom*, he thought gleefully, pushing an entire half of an orange into his mouth. *Gotcha*.

A familiar buzz signalled Ranboo’s sudden arrival. “Uh, new guest!” His voice was tight and frantic. “Big new guest in the courtyard being brought up here and Dream told me to tell you.”

“What?” Techno said. Tommy poked his head out. Ranboo stood before them, Tubbo sprinting in behind him at his heels. He was wringing his hands. “Who is it?”

“Dream said it was a...” Ranboo sucked in a breath through his teeth. “A something god? I didn’t hear him well.”

Tommy was on his feet before he could blink. He tripped over the cornucopia, spilling oranges everywhere. “What? Was it a totem god? Is it Foolish?”

“How would I know if it’s foolish or not?” Ranboo raised his hands defensively. “But it’s coming up right now and—“

Someone appeared in the open doors at the other end of the room, flanked by several mystified guards. “Hey dudes!” They pulled off a shark-shaped hood, revealing a familiar, grinning face. “I heard there was a party!”

Tommy’s heart stopped.

“*Foolish!*”

He soared into Foolish’s arms and was caught by the waist, then lifted high like something beloved. “Little man!” Foolish cried. He was just as gold as Tommy remembered, if not somehow even gold-er. “I knew I’d find you here!”

Foolish pulled him in close, holding a hand to the back of his head as Tommy’s breath went ragged. “Foolish!” He squeaked. His vision blurred. “I never thought— I thought I’d never see you —“

“I was never going to stay away!” Foolish replied. “I just had to get a couple things taken care of before I came for another visit. Boring stuff. I’m happy to be back.”

I thought you hated me. You don’t hate me. Tommy let out a sob. “I missed you so much. I thought Dad had — had—“

Foolish tipped back his head and cackled loud enough for it to echo. “It takes a little more than a dinky little sword to *kill* me, my man! I’m made of gold!”

“My dad stabbed you!” Tommy said tearfully.

“And I survived!” Foolish gave him a playful flick against the cheek. “No more tears, featherball. We’re at an awesome party! Is it your birthday?”

He turned to face Techno, still sat bewildered in his throne. “I didn’t bring a gift,” he said. “Can I still groove it up?”

Tommy felt himself be pulled from Foolish’s arms. “He ran in ahead of me,” Dream panted, pulling Tommy to his chest. “I don’t know who let him in. It wasn’t me.”

Foolish pouted. “For one, I thought we were playing tag.” He plucked Tommy from Dream’s arms with startling ease and tossed him over his shoulder. “And I let myself in. The gates aren’t hard to jump over.”

He strolled forward, oblivious to the tension written across everyone’s faces. “This place is nice, little man!” He said wondrously, gazing up at the glimmering chandelier hanging above their heads. “You the king here or something?”

“No, I am.” Techno stood, then waved the puzzled guards away with a flick of his hand. “What do you want, totem god? There is no death here.”

Foolish shrugged. “Nothing, man. I just came to see my little feathery friend.” He patted Tommy’s back. “He’s heavier now! You guys must be feeding him well.”

“I thought totem gods don’t leave their pocket deserts,” said Phil. “Why are you here?”

Tommy didn’t like how not-happy he sounded. He squirmed from Foolish’s grip and dashed to his father’s side, tugging on his robes when he came near. “Don’t embarrass me!” He whispered shrilly. “I want him to be my friend!”

Phil turned to him, frightened and puzzled all at once. “Tommy, please,” he said, crouching down until they were at equal height. “Let me talk with Techno about this—“

“He’s kind,” Tommy stressed. “And he’s a friend. He kept me safe.”

“I didn’t mean to kidnap him!” Foolish shouted from behind them. “I thought he was you, little horn dude.” He pointed to Tubbo, then gave him a good-natured wave when Tubbo gaped at him with eyes the size of dinner plates. “You sad little princes all look alike.”

Phil nodded, pursing his lips. “Ah,” he said slowly. “I see.”

“And I fed your guy too!” Foolish raised a thumbs up. “He loves cactus fruits.”

“I do!” Tommy said with a hurried nod. “It’s scrumptious. I love it.”

Phil clicked his tongue. “That’s... lovely.”

The heavy fur-lined cape fell from Techno’s shoulders with a *whump* and his wings stretched open wide, every inky feather fluffed. He walked forward, holding his arms out ever so slightly, his wings suspended around him in an arch of darkness that seemed to suck the chandelier’s golden twinkle from the air. Foolish paused, wide-eyed, but made no move to bow as Techno approached

him. *Don't humiliate me, please!* Tommy buried his face in his hands. *He'll never want to be my friend if my stupid scary brother scares him off.*

“My brother considers you a friend,” Techno said. His deep voice rumbled in the tension-filled air. “I tend to trust his judgements.”

He outstretched a hand and Foolish took it, rattling Techno's entire arm with the force of his handshake. Joy burst in Tommy's chest. “*Yes!*” He barrelled into Techno's side and hugged him, stamping his feet on the ground. “Techno, you're the coolest. You're so poggers. I love you.”

“That's the first time I've heard most of those words from you,” Techno said with a chuckle. He turned to Foolish once more, then gestured to the exit. “Come, let's go up to my chancery. What's left of the party has already travelled down to the taverns.”

“A tour!” Foolish exclaimed gleefully. “This is the best day ever.”

The couple maids and servants that hadn't already drunk themselves to stupor scattered in the hallway like flies as Foolish and the rest of them rounded the corner, hiding their expressions of terror beneath masks of politeness. Foolish didn't seem to notice — if he did, he didn't care enough to show it. Tommy trotted at his side, blurting rapid-fire stories about anything and everything around them that interested him. Foolish was enraptured the entire time, which only made Tommy want to talk more. For the first time since Wilbur had died, the walls of his castle felt alive again. They felt like home.

“In here.” Techno pulled the door open with a grunt. “You may sit anywhere you'd like.”

“The door's made of me,” Foolish said with a smile.

Techno nodded. “It is.”

They took possession of the chancery chairs almost immediately, leaving the rest of their to find a place against the windows or on the decorative couches in the corner. Tommy hopped up on the edge of the table and studied the scattered piles of letters and scribble-covered maps. Most of the words were unfamiliar to him, though he did recognize most of the letters with which they were spelled. *Thank goodness I'm not king! I can't read that well.* He wished he had his crown, but Dream had it still looped over his elbow. *It's fun to feel royal, though.*

“Are you still at your temple?” Techno asked.

A solemn look clouded Foolish's face, out of place against his joyful features. “No,” he said, as though the very word pained him. “After what happened, I thought I'd pack up and start all over again. Don't like unhappy memories in my awesome house.”

A pit opened up in Tommy's chest. Though it was the place where his brother had taken his final, shuddering breath, the thought of it no longer existing frightened him. From the way Ranboo and Tubbo shrank against the couch cushions, it seemed they too had made the horrid connection. “I respect that,” Techno murmured. “Where are you now?”

“Closer to here!” Foolish pointed at a spot on one of the wrinkled maps — a small island off the Western shore. “I wanted to be close to my buddy.”

He bumped Tommy's leg with his elbow, and when Tommy couldn't make himself smile, laid a steady hand on his ankle and kept it there as he continued. “I'm keeping my eye on those Eretians, too. Their new Queen was in the temple with us that day, so... don't trust her queen-ing skills.”

“Me neither.” Techno’s face went hard. “Luckily, she does seem to be behaving herself. And the kingdom is technically called the Nikitian kingdom now, but you won’t find many sticklers here.”

Foolish curled a lip. “Yuck. Even sounds spooky.”

“Where’s Foolish Jr.?” Tommy blurted. *I don’t want to think about Wilbur or Nikki or kingdoms right now.*

A jolt of humiliation shot up his spine as the chatter in the room petered off into silence, but Foolish only grinned and squeezed Tommy’s ankle. “At my new home, with Cleopatra. They miss you a lot!”

“They do?” Tommy’s chest seemed to wobble. “Can I see them soon?”

“Super soon, if you want to!” Foolish pulled his shark-hood back over his head. “I want to take Tommy back with me to my home to be my apprentice. I’ve got room for him, and I promise he’d be well taken care of.” He waved his hands cheekily. “No kidnapping this time.”

George whistled. Tubbo let out an excited whoop. Tommy could only gape. “Me?” He said dumbly. “Apprentice?”

“Yeah! You did so well when you were with me last time. I can teach you so much stuff!” He grabbed Tommy’s hands as he went to excitedly grapple at his robes and held them tightly. “We’d be so awesome together. And I’d let anyone you wanted visit! Your dad could come!”

Tommy whirled around. “Dad!” He cried. “I’m going to go be an apprentice—“

His voice died in his throat. Phil stood against the window, wings pulled tightly to his body. The smile on his face was tight, familiar — fake. “What’s wrong?” He asked.

“Nothing, my child. I’m happy for you,” his father replied warmly.

Tommy frowned. “You only call me that when you don’t want to tell me something.”

“He got you there, old man,” Techno chuckled.

Phil deflated. “I— I want you here, with us,” he said, stepping closer until the edge of the desk rested beneath his fingertips. “I want to teach you to read and write. You need to be home.”

There was more behind his eyes, in the empty space above his head where his crown had once been a permanent fixture, but he said nothing more. Disappointment bore down on Tommy’s shoulders. He looked back to Foolish, lips pushed together in a pout. “I can’t read or write, little man,” Foolish said. “Don’t think I’d be too good of a teacher, either. Maybe your dad’s right.”

“When you’re older, Tommy,” Phil said gently. “I promise. I just don’t want to send you away for now.”

“Why not for a month or two?” Dream piped up from the back. “Give the kid a vacation. Send him during the colder months and let him experience some real sun for the first time.”

Tommy turned just to see George’s elbow hit the side of Dream’s ribs, drawing from him a quiet mumble of pain. “Well,” Phil began, “I suppose—“

His words found an abrupt end as Tommy rocketed himself across the table and launched himself into his father’s side with enough force to knock him straight to the ground. “Thank you!” He

cried, laughing so hard his brain felt like it was full of marbles. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“One month.” Phil tapped him on the nose. “That’s what we’re starting out with. One month and no more.”

Tommy threw himself to his feet and careened into Foolish’s waiting arms. “A month! A whole month!” His wings clapped uncontrollably, dragging papers and maps to the floor. “You’re the smartest dude ever, Dream!”

Dream bumped his hip into George’s and grinned as George scoffed. “Look at that. I’m right once again.”

“Shut it,” George muttered, but a smile crept up the sides of his mouth nonetheless.

“It’s a sign that you should listen more to me.”

“It’s a sign that you’re going to get my foot up your ass.”

~

“I hope Dream is a good fighting teacher,” Ranboo whispered, curling his tail over Tommy’s leg. “He still scares me a little, but he’s so nice now too.”

“If he’s mean, write back to me and I’ll tell George during a kingly meeting,” Tubbo replied. He tugged the edge of the blanket they all shared farther over him, holding it steady when Tommy and Ranboo tried to yank it back. “He always listens to George when he gets mad at him.”

“I wonder if Foolish can teach me magic!” Tommy shuffled himself across his pillow until he felt the end of Ranboo’s ear nudge against his temple. “What if I learn to teleport? Wouldn’t that be poggers?”

“I would not let you teleport,” Tubbo replied with a giggle. “It’s bad enough that you can *fly* .”

Tommy reached his arm over Ranboo’s body and whacked Tubbo’s shoulder over the blankets. “I am the best flyer!” He said. “And I’d be the best teleporter, too!”

“We’ll see what your dad thinks of that idea,” Ranboo chuckled.

Tommy gave him a solid whack on the chest as well, making him squawk. Then Tubbo twisted onto his side, pulling the blankets off Tommy entirely. “Asshole!” He said. “No teleporting until I learn to do something cool.”

Tommy threw himself across the bed, landing on Tubbo’s side with a loud *oof*, and for a long moment they squabbled and kicked at one another, half-blind without the light of day to lead their courageous battle. Tommy invented three new swear words on the spot when Tubbo’s heel landed dangerously close to his crotch. An impressive new record, he was sure.

There came a knock at the door. “Bed,” came Techno’s stern voice. “Or I’m cancelling all your plans.”

“Can’t hear you,” Tommy cried. “We’re sleeping! Go away!”

Techno scoffed, but his footsteps faded down the hall and disappeared. Their voices faded to hushed, giggling whispers, and the blanket was spread evenly across them once more. From the

window outside came a single beam of silvery-blue moonlight, illuminating the room in Wilbur's favourite colour.

Tommy hoped he could feel like this every day for the rest of his life.

"You guys have to write to me all about what you're learning," he said, hardly loud enough for his friends to hear. "Then we can share the learning, and we'll all be super smart and kick ass together. Awesome king, awesome knight, and awesome me."

In the moonlight, Tommy watched Ranboo and Tubbo grin.

"Deal."

Chapter End Notes

i love ending a story with the same line the prologue ended with :,)

WE'RE DONE??? LOWKEY??? ITS OVER??? bruh I am losing my mind and I could cry rn

Only the epilogue remains, now! I hope you all enjoyed the little sad-ist reference. pls lass I need the new animation pls pls pls I'm begging

If you have any questions about the characters (past, present, or future!), then ask away down in the comments! I have a surprising amount of lore for this universe that I didn't finish. I'll miss it :,)

thanks for coming along with the ride! You all made it so worth it. Much love to you, readers ♥

-Ophelia

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It took approximately three minutes of Dream sharpening his axes for George to rise from his slumber with a resounding moan. “Not in the bedroom,” he pleaded, grabbing Dream’s pillow off his side of the bed and burying his face in it. “Go do that on the balcony. I’m trying to rest.”

“It’s cold out,” Dream replied, dragging the sharpening stone down the surface of his new axe. “And I like watching you sleep.”

“Creep. I should have never gotten that thing made for you.”

“Can’t take it back now. I think I love it more than I love you.”

George scoffed, but the laughter that broke through his air of irritation was sweet on Dream’s ears. “Yeah, right.”

It was normal for them, now. To wake up at each other’s sides, to exist through the day as though there were an invisible band drawing them together. The barrier of royalty that Dream had always kept so firmly between them had long since melted away, and he felt as comfortable striding in and out of George’s bedrooms and offices as he felt striding out of his own. George turned away, baring the arc of his spine to the golden sunlight. He didn’t get cold as easily as Dream did anymore. A totem effect, Dream was sure, but he had grown past the point where that bothered him.

George had stopped flinching away when Dream touched his scars.

“Alright, idiot. I’m done.” Dream tossed the sharpening stone onto the nearby table. “Quit your complaining.”

“Hooray.” George turned back onto his back, stretching his arms out in front of him like a lazy cat. “My morning is officially saved.”

Leaning his axe against the woven arm of his chair, Dream stood and crossed the room, pinning the blanket to the bed with his knee as George tried to yank it away. “Come here,” he whispered, and bent down to lay a kiss on George’s forehead. “Good morning,”

“Good morning,” George hummed, tilting his chin to capture Dream’s lips in another kiss. “Someone’s feeling perky today.”

There was a deep flush to his neck and cheeks, and when Dream laid a hand to his bare chest, his skin was warm. Dream shrugged, then twisted himself so he could lay sideways over George’s hips. “Well, we’ve got mail. That always excites me.”

“Mail?” George propped himself up on his elbows. “From who?”

“A certain little guy vacationing in a temple somewhere.” Dream pulled the envelope from his breast pocket, then laughed as George eagerly snatched it from his fingers. “Gods, do you miss him that much?”

“You’d miss him too if you’d watched Tubbo’s head explode all over the table at the last meeting.

Little bastard thought it was hilarious. I'm very ready for *regular* thirteen-year-old boy antics, thank you very much."

"Tubbo already sits in on your meetings?" Dream asked.

George nodded, fingering the edge of the envelope with his thumb. "He's gone full tilt into the king stuff. Makes me nervous for when he's eighteen. If anyone's going to take over the entire continent, it's that kid."

"Good on him. You're a shit king anyway."

George's knee thumped into Dream's back from beneath the blankets. "Fuck off," he snapped, but he couldn't hide his grin. "I'm opening this now."

The yellowed parchment envelope opened easily, revealing a crumpled scroll tied with a long strip of dried grass.

HELLO DREEM

"He didn't get my name right!" Dream said, plucking the paper from George's hands as he moved into a sitting position. "Little asshole. I taught him how to spell it myself."

My Dad sais that i Need to practis my ~~rit~~-writing SO i am writing to you Big Man to tell you that i am doing GRATE i am with foolish fore the months doing magick things it is POGGERS

"What does that mean?" Dream pointed to the unfamiliar word, written in sprawling capitals. "I've never seen that before."

George sat up and leaned over him, tucking his head into Dream's shoulder. "I've got no clue," he snickered, rubbing his cheek against Dream's jaw. "That's definitely not a real word."

"He's making up his own language now. What a scholar."

ALSO it is now one yeer of Tecknoblayd as KING!!!! i wish I coud be their but i am too bizee being COOL pleas come viset me Dreem if u can it wood be so poggers bossman

"Aw, he's playing favourites!" George pretended to pout. "Can't believe I didn't get an invite."

"Poor baby," Dream hummed. "Going to go off and cry about it?"

"Yes," George pressed his nose into Dream's shoulder. "Wah, wah, wah. I'm destroyed."

"Pissbaby."

"*You're* the pissbaby."

i am getting reely good at reading!!! my dad sends me leters all the time. ~~Spa~~Speling is still not fun but i am getting better with it. Foolish dusnt know how to spel too so thats bad. i miss u and ~~Go~~ ~~Joe~~ Gorge (cant spel his name its stupid) and i cant wate until you guys come to see me!!!! i am lerning magick stuff its so awesome. i also got a SUN BURN and OW OW OW sucks so fucking bad

A giggle escaped Dream's throat. "Don't laugh at his pain," George chided gently.

"Shut up. That's hilarious."

i hope SapNap is also okay tel him hees cool and i saw an OSHUN so much water but it tastes so

bad gross!!!! dream you wood LOVE the oshun theyres so many animuls all around and they & JUMP FROM THE WATER LITRALEE ITS SO COOL MAN

“One day we’ll go,” George said. “I haven’t been to the ocean since I was little. It really is awesome, though.”

“I can’t even imagine it,” Dream said. “Is it like a big lake?”

“Imagine the biggest, unending lake you’ve ever seen that’s all sandy and smells like fish and salt. That’s the ocean.”

Dream crinkled his nose. “Gross.”

“You’ll love it when you see it.”

“Only because you say I will.”

pls tel me how u guys r DOING!!!! i want too nowe all the cool king stuff u do. if u guys r merreed yet i want too nowe too dont worrie i can keep a seecret!!!

okay i have no more payper to write on now

GOOD~~B~~A~~HE~~ EYE

TOMMY BIG MAN

Dream let the scroll fall closed against his lap. “Well, he’s certainly getting his writing practice in.”

“He’ll pick it up in no time. He’s a smart kid.” George laid back down, playing with the hem of Dream’s tunic. Dream read the letter over again, feeling a spark of pride at how easily the scribbled letters melted into familiarity. *I’m reading*, he thought in wonder, though he’d been able to do it for months. *That’ll never not be cool.*

“What are you going to write back?” Dream said. “I know he’ll be excited to hear about Ranboo’s stay, but not much else has gone on.”

“What *I’m* writing back? You’re doing it!” George exclaimed. “The kid’ll be so excited to get a letter from you that he’ll crap his pants.”

Dream grimaced and let out a moan. “I have shit handwriting. He won’t be able to read anything I say!”

“You’ll be fine,” George hummed. The pads of his fingers pressed against the small of Dream’s back just hard enough to tickle. “You need the practice, anyway. You hate writing shit for me.”

“Because I’m bad at writing! Reading, I’m great at. The best. But *writing* ?” Dream fell back, pinning George’s arm beneath him. “My hands don’t like holding quills. They’re stupid and small.”

“*You’re* stupid and small.” George tried futilely to yank his arm out, but eventually resigned to throwing his free arm over Dream’s chest and curling into his chest. One of his ankles kicked its way out of the blankets and slid over Dream’s calf, growing goosebumps in the cool air.

“You’re all warm,” Dream said, pressing a kiss to the top of George’s forehead. “What do you think Tommy would do if we told him we were married?”

"I'm not sure what he thinks marriage is!" George giggled. "He seems to think it's an insult!"

"One day, I'll just tell him we are. Just to see how long it takes for him to spill the beans to everyone else."

"Gods, seeing him try and keep a secret like that would be a gift like no other," George said. His hair tickled Dream's nose. "If he lasted a week, I'd agree to marry you for real."

"Really?" Dream replied with a laugh. " *That's* what it takes?"

George stuck his tongue out. "Don't get offended. We both know royal marriage is bullshit. Most people wouldn't even consider ours to be a real marriage because you aren't bringing in another kingdom to merge with." He rubbed his nose against Dream's chest. "I've got all I want here. I don't need to put on twenty-five pounds of clothes and have an old priest read to us for an hour just to tell us not to fuck anyone else."

"So that means I can fuck someone else if I want? 'Cause there's no paperwork saying I can't."

The smack George landed to Dream's sternum nearly winded him, but he laughed though it nonetheless.

"Alright," he said, rising rather reluctantly from the warmth of George's arms. "I'll stay faithful for now. Only because I think you're the only person on this planet to be attracted to me."

"Good," George cried triumphantly. He nestled himself into the crinkled dip in the blankets where Dream had laid moments before, pulling the covers over him until nothing but the slope of his nose and his nest of dark hair was visible against the patterned fabric. *Dickhead*, Dream thought, but it rang between his ears like a love confession. *I should have sharpened my axe for longer.*

He sat down at George's meticulously-organized desk and plucked a quill from the pot. "You're writing it now?" George asked. "I'd have thought you'd have put it off a little more."

"What can I say?" Dream unrolled a decently large scroll. "I miss the little shit."

Hello Tommy!

Dream scowled. "This already looks like garbage."

"Doesn't matter," George said. "He'll love it just because it comes from you."

we miss you!!! Things are really great over here. Me and George are training lots of little kids and teaching them how to read. Its a lot of fun!! Sapnap and Qwackity and our freind Bad (he says he met you when you were little??? please explain) are helping out too, so there great too. Ranboo came for a month and a bit just befor you went to foolish and he was awesome. if you see him please tell him he's a great guy and we loved him hear! Youd do great hear too but i dont trust you with a sord yet ;p

"There's a 'w' in 'sword'," George said, suddenly behind him. The cover of his bed was wrapped around his hips, dragging against the wooden floor.

Dream pursed his lips. "Fuck this language and it's stupid hidden letters."

also NO me and george are not married!!!! and we probably wont be for a while because royal merrege marrage mairrage

“M-A-R-R-A-I-G-E,” George said quickly.

“That’s my new least favourite word,” Dream grumbled.

MARRIAGE reely sucks. Were just fine like this. George misses u a lot too and wants to come see foolishs house with me!! we want to see the ocean it seems so cool ill deffinitly feed you to a big fish tho

George snorted. “The cruelty.”

just jokes!!! i hope foolish has you learning lots. i bet ur dad is super ~~proud~~ proud of you!!! im reely proud of you too. Your learning lots and growing up and I hope your having a blast doing it!

The end of the paper crinkled as Dream fought to make his letters fit. “That’s nice,” George said, and his voice was as warm as a summer’s day. Dream leaned back into him, smiling as George rested his head on top of Dream’s and pressed a kiss into his hair. It was peaceful. It was nice.

Dream couldn’t want anything more.

come visit when you can. Your always welcome at are place. ill show you my awesome new axe and teach u how to use it. Love you kid!

Your freind,

Dream :)

Chapter End Notes

well now what the fuck am i supposed to do with my time now Huh

Very melancholy and yet so happy tonight. I’m so proud of this fic. I’m so proud of the artists that have made art from this fic. I’m so proud of the people who take time from their days to leave long comments for me to read over and over on days I can’t bring myself to write. You all have been so kind and encouraging to me and I am so honoured to have given a little back to a community I love. This has reawakened my love for writing and my heart feels full. Thank you, every single one of you. I hope I can keep writing things that bring you guys joy (or pain, but it’s practically the same thing).

Any questions about the COSSOG lore or characters, no matter how inconsequential? Want any explanations of a plot point? Ask down below! I probably won’t make an extra chapter of the lore itself but the comment section is free reign of any question you’d like :) be sure to read the other comments you may find some fun pieces of lore ;D

One piece I will share with you all now: Tubbo does, in fact, go on to be one of the most respected and feared kings in the continent’s history. History books long remember the king with the golden face and the half-enderman knight who spent his life by his side.

o7 everyone. Thank you for everything. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity. Hope to be back soon! Follow my tumblr @opheliabloo!!!

-Opheliabloo

UPCOMING FIC ALERT

Chapter Summary

you're reading this because i have to capitalize on the prime boys excitement everyone say thank you scott smajor

IM BACK FUCKERS

wasn't going to reveal this so soon... but the cyan coyotes got me EXCITED OKAY

here's a sneak peek of my upcoming fic, which I hope to start posting around MCC: The Way Of Kings! I'm really branching out with this one so I hope you all enjoy!

In a land of sorcerers and avians and a hulking half-beast king, anonymous mercenary Dream and his young ward are given the biggest task of their lives — kidnap the prince Ranboo, soon-to-be heir of the crown, and bring him back to them alive. At the other end of the deal lies a near mythical reward: three totems of Undying, capable of saving their holder from certain death. It's an offer they can't refuse. As their mission begins and people begin to fall in the collateral damage, the king turns to desperate measures to protect his only child.

On the other end of town, in a dampened cell within a seaside prison, Technoblade awaits a looming execution date. Though unbeknownst to him, old friends lurk in the shadows, ready to set him free in exchange for returning to a life he swore he'd abandoned forever. They need his help — badly, and they'll stop at nothing to get it.

Or: In which Dream and Tommy are assassins, Wilbur and Phil are the ones sent to kill them, and Technoblade just wants to retire.

If you enjoyed 'That's, Like, A Hundred Miles', you'll love this primeboys story! Somehow TWOK!tubbo is even more insane than he was in COSSOG, so have that to look forward to as well.

See you all soon! ;)

-Ophelia

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!